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OR,

The Black Bluffs Mystery.

BY JO PIERCE,

AUTHOR OF "BOB O' THE BOWERY," "JAUNTY
JOE," "HOTSPUR BOB," "THE VAGABOND
DETECTIVE," "GAMIN BOB," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOY BOATMAN'S DISCOVERY.

THE town of Black Bluffs was in a state of great excitement. Ordinarily a quiet place, it had been stirred to its center by an event which made men and women alike suspend their daily labors, and stand in groups to talk with hushed voices and grave faces.

Murder had been done!

The village people had read of such things before, but they seemed like the memory of a

IT WAS GRAY'S VOICE. HE HAD COME AT SIM'S CALL, BUT HE WOULD NOT BE IN TIME TO INTERFERE. THE BOY MUST DEPEND UPON HIMSELF AND HE DID SO NOBLY.

dream. They never realized what it was to violently deprive a human being of life until it was known that a dead man lay in the Old Stone House on the hill—a murdered man.

The crowd collected in Elihu Austin's hotel talked soberly of the affair.

"I don't see who could have harmed the old squire," said Austin.

"He hadn't an enemy in the world," added Abel Warner.

"Not one."

"Must have been a tramp."

"But nothing was stolen."

"True, but what could have been the motive, if it was not for plunder of some sort?"

"Revenge," suggested Uncle Eben Snow, who was a village oracle.

"But he had no enemy."

"Gentlemen," replied Uncle Eben, stroking his gray beard, "I hold that no man can safely say that. I have seen a good deal of the world."

It was in this way that the oracle always crushed opposition. He had traveled; the others had not. Consequently, he was by far better qualified to say what was probable, and to speak of the ways of the world. But this time his hearers did not yield so readily.

"Nobody around here would harm the old squire," declared Elihu, doggedly.

"The assassin may have come from a remote place—New York, San Francisco, London or Calcutta—to settle the old score," decided Uncle Eben, with a wave of his hand.

"He did have comp'ny."

It was a voice which had not before taken part in the conversation; a voice which arose from one corner, speaking in short, curt, peculiar tones; and one which was certainly the most indifferent voice heard in Black Bluffs that day.

Everybody looked at the speaker, but, though he was only a boy, he was not at all embarrassed by the regard. In fact, he was popularly supposed to be proof against embarrassment and all similar emotions. He was believed to be proof against all feeling that a boy ought to have.

Tradition, or recollection, or something of the sort, if called upon, would have said that his name was Simeon Wallace, but he was always called "Surly Sim."

The *sobriquet* seemed well applied, for he was altogether different from other boys. He was now fifteen years of age, and a well-built, muscular youth, but he had never been known to play with other boys, nor make friends with them, and with all, old or young, he was uncommunicative, unsocial and moody.

People called him a hard boy, yet they would have been troubled to particularize a willful crime, or misdemeanor, he had committed.

He was simply a boy with a bad name. He had been left an orphan when a mere babe, and though taken care of after a fashion, nobody knew much about his parents, and they rushed to the conclusion that they, and he, must be particularly bad—so ungenerous is a world's charity.

Thus he started in life with a no-good reputation, and he had never done anything to get rid of it. He was apparently friendless, and rightly so, too. Such a surly young fellow could certainly be of no good to the world or himself.

So reasoned the people, and when Surly Sim put in his word in the conversation the glances bent upon him were not very friendly or encouraging.

"What do you know about it?" sharply demanded Austin.

"You heard what I said, didn't ye?" returned Sim, in his curt way.

"Yes, we all heard, and we just want to know how *you* know the squire had company?"

"He said as how he was goin' there."

"Who did?"

"The man I rowed over."

The crowd evinced more interest. For some time Sim had been in the habit of rowing persons across the river in a boat he owned, in the style of a miniature ferry, and this made his last remark suggestive.

"Who did you row over?" Uncle Eben inquired, stirring himself as much as seemed dignified for an oracle.

"Don't know his name."

"Where did he come from?"

"Don't know."

"Where did he go?"

"Don't know."

Terse and indifferent was each reply, and Austin lost patience.

"See here, can't you go ahead and tell the story like a civilized human?" he cried. "We don't want to ask so many questions."

"You ain't obleeged ter ask them, be ye?"

Surly Sim did not say this as a retort; it was his old morose way, and he seemed utterly indifferent.

"Simeon," now remarked Uncle Eben, persuasively, "please let us know all about it. You brought a man over in your boat. He was a stranger. Well, what did he look like, and what reason have you to suppose he went to the old squire's?"

"He asked where he lived an' then started that way."

"Ah! when was this?"

"Last night—nine o'clock."

"Suspicious, *very*," was Abel Warner's opinion.

So thought all the others, and, by the use of patience and a good many questions, they drew the following story from the taciturn ferry-boy.

He had been on the point of leaving the west bank of the river the previous night, to return and put away his boat until another day, when a man came hurriedly down to the bank. He showed that he was a stranger by asking if Sim would take him across. This proves that he did not know of the "ferry."

Next he inquired where the old squire lived, and Sim had told him. When they touched the east side the stranger had started as directed.

All this seemed particularly suspicious to the villagers, and the boy's account of the stranger did not lessen the doubts of the hearers.

The evening had been anything but cold, yet the man had worn an overcoat of the kind then in fashion—one with a cape over the shoulders—and this cape he had held close around his face—to avoid having his face seen by Sim, the crowd decided.

"A very suspicious individual," echoed Uncle Eben. "Ver-y suspicious, I should say, and I have traveled a good deal. Find this man, boys, and you will find the old squire's murderer."

Nathan Barnard, the dead man, had once been the most prominent citizen of Black Bluffs. Seven years before the time of his violent demise he had abandoned public life, and, afterward, lived almost a hermit existence, with only his aged servants, Thomas and Ann Nason, to keep him company.

Trouble had driven him to this step. His only child, Mary, had married a worthless fellow and almost broken her father's heart, and then he grew morose and shut himself up in the Old Stone House, as his home was called, and avoided all his old neighbors.

This trouble was talked of now. The poor old squire had deserved a happier life. The most honest of men, it was a pity that his last years had been those of sorrow, and his end one of violence.

Those who had known and loved him were eager to find his assassin, and the officers of law soon knew what Surly Sim had related. Constable Samuel Gray saw the boy, talked with him, and set out to find the man in the cape-overcoat.

He argued that this man must have left some trace on the west side of the river, and started off in search of clues. It was Sim who took the constable across on this occasion. The boy did not concern himself visibly about the murder, and was almost the only one in town who went about his duties as usual.

All day he attended to his "ferry," lingering by the river when not occupied, and watching alertly for possible customers.

As business was seldom pressingly lively, he had considerable spare time on his hands, and he spent it on the bank, loitering about to kill time. Here he was always to be found when wanted, always waiting, and never playing with other boys.

He might have had their complay, but he was so unsocial and surly that they had made a formal resolution to have nothing to do with him.

On this occasion Sim's presence on the bank was productive of an incident outside of the usual order of things. He was moving idly among the low bushes when he caught sight of something white on the ground. This he picked up, and found that he held an envelope.

No one in Black Bluffs would have given the boy credit for being able to read, but, read he could, nevertheless. The inscription on the envelope, however, was very indistinct, and he drew out the letter before he had any idea to whom it belonged.

As he glanced over what he found there his face first assumed a surprised expression, and then grew crafty and speculative.

The letter was as follows:

"ERWIN REDMOND:—I have received your communication of the 12th, but condescend to answer it only because I fear you may otherwise come here. I told you fifteen years ago, when you married my daughter, that I was forever done with you and her. I repeat it now. She, happily for her, is past human need. You say you and your daughter are suffering. This is nothing to me. Once and for all I say that if you and she were starving at my door I would not give you a crust. Let this suffice, and never dare address me again."

"NATHAN BARNARD."

It was not in Surly Sim's nature to show much emotion of any kind, but he now nodded his head with some interest.

"So!" he muttered, "a letter writ by the old squire. I've heard o' this Erwin Redmond. 'Twas him that married Mary Barnard an' made the squire so hoppin' mad, and driv him ter be a hermit. Now, then, don't this mean suthin'?"

It was a pertinent question. Only a few hours before had landed the man who was now believed to be Squire Barnard's murderer at this point, and he had gone up the bank where the letter had been found.

Was there a connection between all these facts? Was it possible that Erwin Redmond had come to Black Bluffs, in defiance of Barnard's order, to renew his appeal orally, and that he was the man who had done the dark deed?

"This letter is worth savin'!" murmured Surly Sim.

CHAPTER II.

TWO BELLIGERENT OLD GENTLEMEN.

THE boy put the paper in his pocket, and, a few minutes later, memory of it was temporarily banished as he saw the boat signal run up on the opposite side of the river. He hastened to his craft and rowed across.

The would-be voyagers proved to be two men, and a boy a few years older than Sim. The former were strangers, but the boy belonged in the village. He was named Adelbert Abbott, and was a person Sim most cordially disliked. The Abbotts ranked among the first families of Black Bluffs, though the head of the family, whose Christian name was Jason, was known to be a tricky and none-too-conscientious man.

One of his sons was admitted to be weak-minded, and Adelbert barely escaped the same charge. He was a conceited young fellow who, not being obliged to work, put on a great many airs and laid himself open to the charge of being a mere dandy.

He looked superciliously at Sim as the boat approached, but as the two boys never spoke, there was no reason for anything unusual. Adelbert ostentatiously helped the men in, though both looked stronger than he.

Both, however, were at least three-score years old, and one had abundant snow-white hair and beard which gave him a patriarchal look.

They had been talking when they entered the boat, and did not stop as Sim rowed away.

"I tell you, Woods," belligerently observed the white-haired man, "nothing is ever gained by harshness. A colt has human feeling, sir—don't smile, sir; I say *human feeling*, and I mean it—and he can be conquered easiest by appealing to his reason. Gentleness, sir, is the grand lever which moves the world."

"It may move old women—nothing more!" Woods retorted. "A colt is like a child, Mr. Bigelow, and the rod is as necessary as food and air. The rod, sir, is the great civilizer of the world!"

"Nonsense!"

"Your views are nonsense."

"My views are *reason*, sir."

"They are the reason of an old woman."

"I'd rather be an old woman than a pirate, sir."

The venerable gentlemen glared at each other, and then Woods fiercely resumed:

"You could no more tame a colt than you could a shooting star."

"I begin to think I shall have to tame a raving lunatic!" Bigelow declared, warmly.

"I didn't know you were interested in colts, Uncle Bigelow," observed Adelbert, with emphasis on the word "uncle," and a glance at Sim.

"Who said I was?" the old gentleman retorted. "Hang it, I never even ride; I *won't* ride while horses are so miserably 'broken' as they are now."

The wrangle continued until the other bank was reached, and Surly Sim, while outwardly indifferent, was led to believe that he had a pair of uncommonly "cranky" passengers, but a

the midst of the quarrel, Mr. Bigelow asked Mr. Woods for a cigar, and Mr. Woods was obliged to borrow a match of Mr. Bigelow.

Their quarrel did not seem to be so very bitter.

"You will go to our house at once, won't you, Uncle Bigelow?" asked Adelbert, with another sly glance at Sim—he seemed very proud of his companion, and, indeed, Bigelow was an aristocratic old gentleman.

"Hang it! yes. What do you suppose I am here for?" was the curt reply.

Adelbert was a little abashed by this, but he went off with a swagger, anxious to give the ferry-boy the idea that he had hooked a big fish. So he had, in one sense of the word. The Abbots, despite the style they aped, were poor in worldly goods, and had lived from hand to mouth all their lives. They had "great expectations," however.

One of these arose from the fact that Mr. Abbott was a distant relative of murdered Squire Barnard, but as the old squire had never liked Abbott, they had counted but little on this while he lived.

Now that he was dead, however, Abbott was joint heir with two other persons, providing two things did not happen. The first of these was that no child of Mary Barnard Redmond appeared, in which case that child would be the real and only heir. The second was that Mr. Barnard had left no will cutting the Abbots off.

The family had been a good deal excited by the murder, and their hopes arose, but they dared not yet expect anything.

Their greatest expectation, however, lay in the direction of Cyrus Bigelow. Abbott was his own nephew, and all his life had been devoted to scheming for Bigelow's handsome fortune. Here, too, there were other, and equal, heirs, and Abbott had not had a very easy time in besieging the old gentleman.

He was a very eccentric man, who absolutely refused to be made much of, and spent his time wandering about the country. His only companion was Mr. Woods. The latter had been a lawyer, but was now Bigelow's "private solicitor," as his cards read.

In other words, he had retired from active practice to devote his whole time to managing Bigelow's property.

The Abbots had been thrown into a fever of excitement when they learned that their rich relative and his lawyer were coming to visit them. It was the first time they had ever been thus honored, and it looked so encouraging that their hopes rose high.

Adelbert escorted the new-comers to the house, where they were received with all the craftiness possible. All this fell dead, however. They had planned to lavish attentions on the rich man, and he rebuffed every attempt.

With positive rudeness he informed them that all he wanted was enough to eat, and, aside from that, he did not even want to talk except when he saw fit to open conversation.

As he talked nearly all the time this counted for but little, but he was not an easy man to talk with: he had strong opinions of his own, with little respect for others', and even cunning Mr. Abbott never knew what to say to please him. He seemed to be happy only when disputing with Woods, and they disputed on every possible point.

Two hours passed in this way, and then the lawyer gave matters a new impetus. He fumbled about his pocket, and then suddenly cried:

"Hi! where is my watch?"

"Where should it be?" Bigelow retorted.

"Do you suppose I should ask if it was where it should be?" Woods retorted, in turn. "It's gone—gone, sir. I've been robbed!"

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Bigelow.

"I say I have been robbed, and I mean it," Woods fiercely declared. "Don't scoff me, sir. Some one has stolen my watch."

"Most likely, that ferry-boy," at once suggested Adelbert.

Bigelow turned upon him, thumping his cane upon the carpet angrily.

"And why do you think it was the ferry-boy?"

"Because—a—because he has a bad name," faltered the youth.

"I remember he had a hang-dog face," observed the lawyer, suspiciously.

"A very open, frank face!" contradicted Bigelow.

"The face of a thief, I say."

"Then you know nothing about it, sir."

"I do; I understand boys thoroughly," Woods declared, loudly. "I knew the minute I saw that young scamp that he had never been whipped enough. That's what is the trouble

with him. Spare the rod, and you make a thief."

"The rod makes thieves," asseverated Bigelow, shaking his cane at his private solicitor. "Boys are like colts, sir—they require gentleness. Boys have human feeling, sir, and no boy should be whipped."

"All boys should be whipped."

"How do you know? You never had a boy."

"Nor did you ever have one, fortunately for the boy."

The belligerent gentlemen glared at each other so fiercely that Mr. Abbott feared a fight would follow, so he tried to calm the troubled waters by mentioning the watch. The waters did not calm in the least; on the contrary, the two hostiles argued this point as fiercely as they had done the subject of boys in general.

Woods insisted that the ferry-boy was a thief, while Bigelow declared that he was not.

Adelbert, hating Surly Sim, and anxious to put himself forward, slyly observed that he remembered seeing the ferry-boy look covetously at the chain of the watch. Then he found that he had put himself forward too much, for Bigelow shook his cane at him and bade him speak only when asked to speak, vowing that Sim had not looked covetously at the watch.

Still, something had to be done; property valued at two hundred dollars had disappeared, and Woods declared that he would arrest every man, woman and child in the State but he would find it. So the quartette decided to go down to the "ferry" and see if it could be found on the way, or in the boat.

When they reached the river the craft lay rocking beside the bank, but Sim was not to be seen.

"He's gone to pawn the watch," decided the lawyer.

"He can't pawn what he's not got," retorted Bigelow.

"Well, I am going to have that watch. Surly Sim, they call that young rascal, and they say he has a bad name. Now, he's just the one to steal, and I'm going to have him arrested."

"You can't!" protested Bigelow. "There's no proof against him."

"Didn't young Abbott see him look enviously at the watch?"

"I doubt it; and, even if he did, that is no proof."

"It is the best of proof."

"You know better; it is no proof, I say."

"Mr. Bigelow, sir, if it was not for your advanced years I would chastise you—"

"You can't do it, and never could. Try, if you dare!"

The speaker shook his cane at his private solicitor, and both seemed ready to explode with anger, but the amazed Mr. Abbott, who had not expected to find his venerable uncle quite so choleric a person, suggested that they see Surly Sim at once. He must be in the village.

Accordingly they started off, the lawyer vowing that he would have him promptly arrested. And Adelbert fed the flames of his suspicion all he dared.

CHAPTER III.

A GREAT DETECTIVE ON THE SCENE.

THE ferry-boy was at Squire Barnard's old home. His passengers had not long been away when news reached him that he was wanted at the scene of the tragedy. A detective had reached there, and, hearing that Sim and rowed a suspicious stranger across the river, he sent for him at once.

Sim obeyed the call promptly.

When he arrived, Mr. Wickes, the detective, was going over the place, accompanied by one of the selectmen. The latter notified him who the boy was, and Wickes waved his hand in a majestic way.

"Keep near me, boy, and I will question you."

Sim said nothing, but obeyed the injunction. He kept near Wickes, and followed where he went, but seemed as little interested in the matter as though it was only a trivial affair.

"The red-handed assassin did not pass through this gate, sir," announced the detective, with confidence.

"Indeed! How can you tell?" asked Hughes, the selectman.

"The heavy latch of the gate would have rattled and betrayed him, so he leaped the fence, or, more properly, climbed it. Time, you observe, has gathered moss upon the fence. Here is where his hand rubbed off the moss, and here his foot scraped a lower board. He was slow in getting over, which shows that he was no longer young."

"And does not the fact that he knew the gate would rattle show that he was well acquainted?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would not a stranger have gone through the gate, not knowing it would rattle, and—"

"No, sir; instinct told him the gate would rattle. Instinct is a great thing; most criminals and detectives have it. I am a detective, and a Man of Instinct. The assassin's instinct told him the gate would rattle, so he climbed the fence. That is very plain."

By this time they had returned to the front yard, and Wickes pointed one finger at the ground and followed the course it indicated.

"The villain walked here, but in a slow and crafty way. Avoiding the graveled walk, he moved along the green sward. Here he paused and looked up to see if a light was visible. He saw none. At this point, however, he heard that which suggested a score of guilty fears to his depraved mind. What was it? Only a creaking, yet it made his heart quake for a moment. Then he breathed a sigh of relief—it was only yonder limb scraping against the roof."

Wickes pointed solemnly with his index finger.

"How can you tell this?" Hughes doubtfully asked.

"My dear sir, I am a Man of Instinct—ask me no more. Rather let us follow the assassin's course. Here he moved toward the west end of the house. He was seeking a chance to enter. Here he saw a shed, and it seemed just the place to climb. But, no; as he laid his hand on the boards—here is the place—a small piece broke off. He examined it—the wood was dry and rotten—he dared not trust his weight to the old shed. This shows that he weighed at least one hundred and seventy pounds. The shed would uphold a hundred and fifty—possibly fifty-nine. He was disappointed and angry, and kicked over this pail, which stood in the way. This shows that he was a quick-tempered man."

Mr. Hughes asked no question. He had heard a good deal about the shrewdness of detectives, and he began to look upon Wickes with awe.

"Next, he retraced his steps, like this, and was led back to this tree. Its lofty, spreading nature, and the limb extending over the roof, gave him an idea. Could he not climb it? Probably he thought he could, for he *did* climb it. Here are pieces of bark which he loosened and rattled down. The man wore a black suit!"

The selectman could not help asking how Mr. Wickes knew this.

"Because here is a fragment adhering to the rough bark of the tree. See? It was a black, diagonal suit, which shows that the criminal dressed well."

Hughes shivered.

"It is something terrible how you detectives hunt a man down," he had to admit.

"Detectives are born, not made," observed Wickes, with a calm smile. "I will preserve this thread of cloth; it will help hang the assassin. We will now enter the house and see if the man succeeded in entering by yonder window, as he planned."

"He did not, for it was fastened."

"My dear sir," and Mr. Wickes again smiled, "you forget that he could have fastened it after going in, and then come out by the door."

"I did forget this," confessed Hughes, sheepishly. Once or twice Wickes shook his head and pointed a finger at the wall, but he did not see fit to explain why, and Hughes did not venture to ask.

When they arrived at the window he smiled again.

"As I thought, he entered here. On the window-sill you will see bits of bark. These were loosened by the grasp of the murderer's hand, and fell as you see. The assassin entered here on his red errand."

Ann Nason, the late squire's servant, had followed them, and she now said:

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, the winder has always been kept fastened."

"Nevertheless, the assassin entered here. Some one left the window open that night. Here the assassin paused to light a lamp, or bull's-eye lantern. He scratched his match on the wall here."

"This beats witchcraft!" muttered Hughes.

"I'd hate to have you on my trail."

"So do all evil-doers," assured the Man of Instinct, with a calm smile. "Now, let us imagine the course of the red-handed intruder. Instinct tells him that his victim would be asleep on this floor. Naturally, he proceeds to learn where. Grasping his light carefully he tiptoed along. Opening this door he finds himself in the hall. A long pause on his part, and then

he opens *this* door—it is that of the fatal chamber. What sight meets his gaze there? The poor old squire, sleeping in his chair by the table. Let us draw a veil over what followed—a quick thrust and all is over, and Cain stands over slain Abel once more, his inhuman appetite for blood satiated, but at what a fearful cost!"

Mr. Wickes had grown dramatic, and Mr. Hughes shivered noticeably.

Surely Sim, however, looked about the room with the indifference he had all along shown. He was the coolest person there, but the selectman would have ascribed it to hardened depravity had he noticed the fact.

"Once the deed was done the thief retreated down the stairs," Wickes resumed. "Let us follow him. Ah! he was not an old head at crime!"

"Great Scott! how do you know *that*?" asked Hughes.

"He was nervous and excited, and twice on his way down, he hit against the wall, brushing the paper. I can see the marks if you cannot. Of course, once down, he left the house as soon as possible. Now to describe the criminal."

Pausing for a moment he waved his index finger at the selectman and proceeded:

"He was a man of middle age, dressed in a black, diagonal suit, and he wore small boots and had soft hands. He was not a laboring man. Moreover, his complexion was dark."

"Well, well, *well*! you *are* a witch, sure enough!" the selectman ejaculated. "But, how do you know all this?"

"I know he was not young by the way he climbed the fence; I know he was not old by the fact that he could climb this tree. The general shape of his foot I saw on the grass, though there is not enough for a cast. A fragment of his clothing I found on the tree, and I have found a bit of his hair. I know his hands were soft, because the delicate surface of the tree was so little bruised. A laborer would have made far more impression."

"Now, that's what I call getting things down fine!" cried Hughes admiringly.

Mr. Wickes smiled and waved his hand. Then he turned to Surly Sim and looked at him critically.

"Boy," said he, "are you a person of veracity?"

"Don't know," indifferently answered that youth.

"What?"

"You will have to use plain words to him, as he is a very ignorant creature," explained Mr. Hughes. "Sim, what the gentleman wants is to know if you tell the truth?"

"I do, sometimes," curtly replied Sim.

"Not always?" asked Wickes.

"Folks say I don't."

"He's a depraved boy—a terrible boy," put in Hughes.

"That's all *you* know erbout it!" retorted Sim.

Wickes was shrewd enough to see that this was not the way to make the boy talk, and he adopted a friendly tone and soon had his witness talking to the point. He drew forth a vague description which, as far as it went, seemed to agree with the detective's imaginary person, as he took pains to impress upon Hughes's mind.

"You say the stranger held his cape up around his face?" Wickes continued.

"Yes."

"To hide his face so you would not know him again?"

"Might 'a' been that, or he might 'a' had the toothache," was Sim's practical reply.

"Did he have a furtive, sinister air?"

"A *what*?"

"Bless me! how stupid the boy is! I say, did he act as though he was up to mischief?"

"Don't know's he did."

"Perhaps you don't want to tell. Are you keeping anything back? Don't sulk with me, boy—I am an officer of the law, and—"

"Don't care ef you're ten officers," put in the boy curtly. "I've told my story; what more d'ye want? Want me ter hang the man fur you?"

Wickes saw he was in danger of losing one who might prove a valuable witness, and he hastened to smooth matters over. They were soon interrupted, however; they had wandered out of the house, and the entrance of several persons to the yard disturbed them.

One of the new-comers, a gray-headed old gentleman, rushed up to Sim and seized him by the collar.

"Here he is!" the assailant cried; "here's the thief! Now, boy, hand over that watch at once!"

CHAPTER IV.

SIM CAPTURES SOMEBODY.

SIM looked at the speaker in momentary, but not visible surprise. He was accustomed to being kicked around, and it did not disconcert him to be thus unceremoniously collared. He recognized the angry old gentleman as one of his late passengers over the river, but this did not help him to comprehend what was the matter with him.

But the second old gentleman now rushed forward and shook his cane excitedly at the first.

"I protest against this, Woods—I protest emphatically—and I warn you thet you are breaking the peace. This boy will have grounds for a suit against you."

"Protest, and be hanged!" shouted Woods.

"Boy, where is my watch?"

"Woods, this is really too much. Remember that this lad has human feeling. Let me explain—"

"I ain't seen no watch," interrupted Sim.

"What're you makin' such a row for?"

"Do I understand," demanded Wickes, "that this youth has stolen a watch from you?"

"Be careful, Woods—be *very* careful!" warned Mr. Bigelow; "any assertion of yours may be taken into court. You are a lawyer, and know this."

"The watch is missing," explained Woods, more cautiously, "and the boy was seen to look covetously at it."

"Rubbish, all rubbish!" declared Bigelow.

"I never seen no watch onto you," sulkily observed the accused. "Don't b'lieve you ever had any."

"Boy!" and Mr. Woods looked his anger.

"Give it to him!" cried Mr. Bigelow. "Go in, my lad, and show him you have some human feeling. Of course you never took the watch; you don't look like that sort of cattle. You've got too open, good a face for *that*."

The boy looked genuinely surprised.

"Do you know me?" he asked.

"No."

"I'm Surly Sim, an' ev'rybody gives me a kick."

"By George! I'd like to see anybody kick you when I am around!" snorted Bigelow; "I'd kick him if he was as big as—as—a church!"

"Bigelow, I must really protest—"

Woods's angry "protest" was interrupted by his employer.

"Speak up, boy, and let us hear what you have to say. Speak up, Simeon, and show your human feeling."

Kind encouragement was something new to the boy with a bad name, and he spoke with unusual alacrity.

"I haven't touched nobody's watch, an' I didn't see as this man had any. I set in the boat with my *back* ter him all the way over, so how could I 'a' seen he had a watch?"

"By George, sir, your back *was* to him!" cried Mr. Bigelow. "And you—Adonis, or whatever your name is, you said he looked covetously at the watch. Did he look through his own head, or how?"

"'Twas before—before we got into the boat," faltered Adelbert.

"You said, while we were *in* the boat, you young scamp!" shouted Bigelow.

Adelbert felt that he was turning pale. His worthy father, with an eye to Bigelow's dollars, had cautioned him not to say anything which would anger that gentleman, and he felt himself in a very precarious position.

Fortunately for him, Wickes here interposed. The detective felt that it would never do for his witness in the murder case to be branded a thief, and he took a hand in the game with real diplomacy.

Woods was obstinate, but the joint assertion of all the others that Sim could not be arrested without evidence, led him to say that he would defer action.

"Merely defer it, sir, you understand," he added. "I propose to prove all I assert if possible, and whether I can or not, I am sure this wretched boy is bad enough to take the watch. I can see by his looks that he has never been properly whipped, and—"

"He's been whipped too much," Bigelow interrupted.

"I say he has not."

"And I say he *has*!"

Fiercely the old gentlemen glared at each other, and then Woods turned to the boy.

"Tell the truth, for once," he demanded.

"Have you, or have you not, been properly whipped?"

"Wal, ev'rybody in town has tried their hand at it, an' ef I ain't been, 'tain't their fault." Sim replied.

"That's it! that's it!" cried Bigelow. "Look at this forlorn, ragged youth, and see the pernicious results of whipping. No boy should be whipped, sir; it dwarfs human feeling, and irritates the cuticle, and fills our poor-houses. Show me a boy in rags, and I'll show you a boy who has been whipped too much!"

"Show me the inside of a State's Prison," retorted Woods, "and I'll show *you* scores of men who were not whipped *enough* when they were boys!"

The detective believed that a fight was imminent, so he appeared as a peacemaker, and succeeded in calming the storm. The party from Abbott's retreated, but Woods went vowing that he would yet prove Sim guilty of stealing his watch.

As for the boy, he was anxious to get back to his "ferry," and Wickes allowed him to go.

The latest scene made little impression on Sim's mind. He had been accustomed to hear all kinds of evil names applied to him all his life, and the fact that a direct charge had been made, passed for nothing with him.

He was innocent, and the accuser had no proof against him. It was a trifle—an every-day occurrence—and he need give it no further thought. Nor did he, to any extent; he had more important matters with which to occupy his time. The result of a long period of meditation was that he exclaimed:

"That detective is a fool!"

He referred to Mr. Wickes. When that astute person went over the scene and neighborhood of the late murder, Sim had seen and heard all, if he did seem indifferent, and he had silently differed on many points.

Now, thinking it all over, he was so positive in his opinion that he half-unconsciously muttered the above verdict on Mr. Wickes's work and decision.

To him, all that the detective had said seemed like a tissue of absurdities.

He forgot the matter for the time, as a flag was run up on the other side of the river, and he then rowed across. The caller proved to be the constable before mentioned, and Sim had no sooner got him in the boat than he produced the letter he had found on the bank.

This he would have given to Wickes, when at the house, had it not been for the unkind things said by the detective. So Wickes lost a point.

The constable read the letter and was delighted. He had gained news during his search which seemed to fit in with this, and he did not conceal his exultation. He was unusually kind to Sim, and asked him to promise to say nothing about the letter.

Once in the village again he hastily swallowed his supper, and, ordering his team, drove rapidly away toward the north. In answer to inquiries he had winked significantly and said:

"Never mind, now, but when I come back I will bring the murderer with me!"

Mr. Wickes heard of this later in the evening, and he actually turned pale. Was somebody else going to win the fame he was after? The possibility filled his mind with gall and bitterness.

Surly Sim took little interest in what was going on, and when his day's work was done he ascended to his humble room in the shed of an old village house. The owner of this place was a poor man, and not particular as to his tenant, but he did take care to see Sim every rent-day on business.

It was a miserable room in which the boy slept, being not only unfurnished, but the two sides were the sloping boards of the roof, and the only window a small one at the end, with old hats and coats stuffed into the broken panes.

A miserable place, surely, but good enough for a boy with a bad name, every one thought.

Sim was tired after his day's work and bother, and he had not been long on his humble bed before he was sound asleep. In this condition, if he did not dream, he was as good as anybody, and no longer a boy with a bad name.

It was some hours later when he awoke, and the silence outside showed that the village had relapsed into repose. Still, he felt that he had not awakened naturally. He had a vague impression that he had been aroused by some sound.

What was it?

All was silent, and he slowly reclosed his eyes with the idea that he had been mistaken. But, no—the sound again, and, this time, unmistakable. A stir at the further end of his mean room. What could it be? He knew of no way by which even a cat could enter there.

He quickly raised his head.

"Who's there?" he asked.

Again the stir, this time louder than before.

and, he knew, that of footsteps. More, they moved hurriedly, and the window was suddenly darkened as though some one had come between it and him.

Sim sprung from his bed. Poor and despised he might be, but no one had a right to invade his room.

He ran forward, determined to seize the unknown.

"Stop, there, or I'll hit ye!" he cried.

But the intruder did not pause. He was beside the window, and he wormed agilely out of it and disappeared just as Sim would have grasped him.

Sim did not hesitate a moment, but sprung after him. It was no easy descent to the ground, but he struck upon his feet and kept his balance. He saw the unknown in rapid retreat, and he shot after him.

Before then Sim had never had a chance to measure his speed against other boys, but it was now shown that he was a runner. He rapidly overhauled the fugitive—he seized him.

The unknown wheeled and struck out at Sim, but the latter dodged the blow and seized the hostile hand. A brief struggle followed, but Sim was by far the stronger of the two, and he easily held the other.

"Algernon Abbott!" he exclaimed.

It was, indeed, Adelbert's younger brother, and he who was said to be weak-minded, and he was now in a great rage.

"Let me go, you low creature!" he said, in a squeaking voice. "How dare you molest a gentleman's son?"

"Do gentlemen's sons break inter houses at night?" demanded Sim, never relaxing his hold.

"That's none of your business, you vicious wretch!" Algernon retorted, angrily.

"I generally make it my business when they break inter my quarters, an' I'm goin' ter hold ye. Now, you stan' still an' answer my questions—"

"I won't! You're a low beggar, and I am Jason Abbott's son."

"I hope he's proud on ye."

"Don't you dare insult me, sirrah, or by my halidom I'll cleave you like a butchered ox!"

Algernon delivered this tremendous speech as though he expected to crush his captor, but Sim was not perceptibly crushed.

"I dunno what crazy gibberish you're gettin' off," he replied, "but I want to know why ye was in my room."

"None of your business, you wretch!"

"I'll make it my business right away. I'll hand ye over ter the constable fur breakin' an' entryin', ef ye don't s'plain."

"You dare not; I am a gentleman's son."

It was not a bold voice; on the contrary, the voice trembled and so did Algernon, and Sim clearly saw that he had frightened the weak-minded youth. He took no pleasure in this, and rather pitied him as a fellow unfortunate, despite his conceit and false pride, but he felt that there was cause for firmness now.

"You kin take yer pick," he said, doggedly; "own up, or I'll hand ye over ter be arrested. Which 'll it be?"

CHAPTER V.

CONFRONTING THE PRISONER.

ALGERNON had by this time become a good deal frightened, despite his bold speeches, and he began to whimper.

"I don't see why you want to abuse me," he said.

"Wal, I don't see why you come a-prowlin' inter my room," Sim practically answered. "That's what I want ter know, an' you'd better tell me."

"I don't know why I did."

"That's a lie!" Sim bluntly observed.

"I didn't mean any harm."

"I ain't so sure of that."

Algernon stood whimpering and looking down at the ground, but said nothing.

"Ef I had broke inter your house there'd been a great hullabaloo," Sim continued. "I begin ter think it's about time for me ter claim some rights, like other folks. I wa'n't ter blame 'cause I was born, an' I don't know why I should be any different from other folkses, nor why you should break inter my room at night."

"I won't do so again, and I'm sorry now. Come, Sim, you're a good fellow, and I'll give you a dollar if you'll let me go."

"I don't want none o' yer money, ner yer soft soap," Sim replied. "I orter hand ye over, but I presume nobody would hold ye on my complaint. You kin go, but don't ye come ter my room ag'in—don't ye do it!"

With this warning he wheeled and walked

away. He had not shown mercy because he thought it was deserved, but the fact remained that Algernon was not so bright as some boys, and Sim pitied him for that. There was a kind heart under Sim's ragged clothes.

Young Abbott ran away, and his late captor returned to his room. Once there he looked about to discover what Algernon had been doing. He looked in vain. He had nothing worth stealing, and even what was comparatively worthless remained as he had left it.

He could find nothing that had been disturbed. He went to bed with the mystery unsolved, but lay awake for some time thinking about it. The intruder was foolish, but this did not seem to explain why he had come to the room at such an hour.

Sim felt sure there was some motive for it all, and the future was destined to prove him right. When he did learn, his feelings were not so kind toward Algernon.

In the morning he awoke to find that Black Bluffs had a new sensation. The constable had apparently made good the boast he made when he left the village—he had returned with a prisoner whom he presented as the murderer of Squire Barnard, and great was the excitement.

The prisoner was Erwin Redmond, son-in-law of the murdered squire.

No wonder the village people were excited. They remembered Mary Barnard well—a light-hearted, winsome girl who had married against her father's will. The old squire had bitterly opposed the union, asserting that Redmond was of bad character, though nobody else had ever been able to learn why he objected to Redmond.

The latter had been a stranger in Black Bluffs, and had seemed agreeable and pleasant.

But Barnard never forgave them, and he disinherited Mary and ordered them to never darken his doors again. They had gone away, and from that time they had never been seen at Black Bluffs. It was known that Mary was dead, and that she had left a daughter—and that was all that they did know.

Now the old squire was dead, and Erwin Redmond was under arrest as his murderer.

Sim had just started to his daily work when he was informed that the constable wanted to see him at the hotel. He obeyed the call, and was conducted to a room where sat several men. He flashed a quick glance around, and saw that one was a stranger.

This man was a tall, slender, gentlemanly-looking individual, but, as he sat near an officer, Sim believed him to be the prisoner.

"Hal here is the boy!" said the constable, briskly. "Now then, Sim, come this way and use your eyes. Look at this man, and see if he is the party you rowed over night before last—the one you told me about."

He indicated the slender gentlemen, who looked pale and excited.

"I must protest," he began, nervously, but the constable interrupted him.

"Your protest can come in later. I want this boy to use his eyes now. Sim, is this the man in the cape-coat?"

The pale stranger looked him full in the face, but it was not a bold or defiant gaze. Instead, it was full of fear, and if ever a look spoke that one implored the boy to deny all knowledge of him.

"Speak out!" the constable added.

"Wal, I was a-lookin'," calmly replied Sim. "I was a-sizin' on him up. Yes, he's the chap; I should know him anywhar. He ain't got his coat on, but that's him."

The constable turned sternly to his prisoner. "You denied having been in Black Bluffs in years, Mr. Redmond," he said.

The prisoner brushed his hand nervously across his face.

"Suppose I prove that the boy is mistaken," he said.

"I ain't mistaken," Sim confidently replied. "It's the same figger, same voice, same face. You're the man I rowed over, an' who asked the way ter Squire Barnard's."

"That settles it," decided the constable.

Redmond settled back in his chair, and his expression was so utterly miserable and hopeless that Sim began to regret that he had spoken. He knew what it was to be wretched, and he pitied this man.

"What have you to say?" the constable added.

"Nothing!" Redmond tersely replied.

"You may as well confess."

"Confess what?"

"That you killed Squire Barnard."

"Then I should tell a lie!" the prisoner cried, excitedly. "My hand was never raised against him; I never harmed him in any way. I swear it!"

"Then you're mighty unlucky as to circumstances. You denied having been in this town in years, and you are given the lie by this boy and the letter you dropped. More, you inquired the way to Barnard's. Next morning he was found murdered."

Redmond sighed, but did not answer.

"Will you confess?"

"I swear that I never harmed the old man!" the prisoner repeated, in a firm voice.

At this moment there was the sound of light steps, and some one very different from the rest of the group appeared. It was a girl who was probably thirteen years of age, but who, being small of stature, looked somewhat younger.

She ran to Redmond's side and threw her arms around his neck. He started, folded her in his arms, and then his eyes filled with tears.

Her eyes were anything but dim—they were sparkling with anger, and she turned indignantly upon the men.

"How dare you trouble my father?" she cried. "He is the best man who ever lived, and he never harmed any one. You ought to be ashamed to say that he did!"

No one answered, and even the constable felt pained and embarrassed. He was not a hard man, and the sight of this motherless girl, who might soon be fatherless, also, appealed to his better feelings. He, like most of the others, remembered Mary Barnard in her happy days. This, her child, was much like her, though darker, like the father, and it seemed to him now as though they were persecuting Mary.

"Have you all lost your tongues?" demanded the child, after a pause, but though no one there thought her manner rude, Redmond gently said:

"Hush, Irma! these gentlemen mean well enough."

"Then they take a poor way of showing it."

Her gaze wandered until it reached Surly Sim's face, and then became fixed. The boy was staring at her blankly. He was thinking that he had never before seen any one so like a fairy, only—he did not express it that way. Irma was very pretty, but she was indignant, just then, and she was not favorably impressed by Sim's face.

"You're the boy that is talking against my father, are you?" she demanded. "You want to swear his life away, and he's the only friend I've got in the world."

Surly Sim flushed scarlet. Why he did so he did not know, though he immediately felt himself the greatest villain in the world after Irma's last words. In no other way could she have appealed to him so eloquently.

He knew what it was to be alone in the world.

"I—I—didn't think—I didn't know—"

His stammering, uncertain speech was interrupted.

"I give you one more chance to confess, Redmond," said the constable. "If you don't do it, you will be locked up just the same."

"I have nothing to confess," was the mournful, yet steady, reply. "I never did Squire Barnard injury; I can say no more. If I alone was concerned I could say to you that I care nothing for the future, but, for the sake of my motherless child, I am sorry to see you wrong her father. You are depriving her of her one protector."

"Don't worry about her," the constable hurriedly rejoined. "She shall not suffer; I'll see to it myself that she has as good a home as the village can boast. Now I think of it, she's a rich girl now; she's heir to all Barnard's property."

"Not one cent shall she ever touch!" cried Redmond. "The money would burn her fingers. No, no; she shall never touch a cent of that man's money!"

"I thought you wanted her provided for."

"Better that she should live on charity than—But never mind; I will see to this, later. For now, I only ask a home for my child where she will be safe from harm."

Irma declared that she would remain with him and share his fortunes fully, but her wishes were overruled. The constable bestirred himself, and soon had a place secured for her. Then she was taken away sobbing, and Erwin Redmond was led to the village jail.

Then, and not before, Surly Sim walked toward his ferry. For once he thought nothing of the few cents to be earned or lost on the river. The scene he had just witnessed occupied his mind wholly.

Irma's reproof still seemed to ring in his ears, and he felt like a criminal. Deeply enough he now regretted having ever mentioned his passenger of the fatal night, and that he had handed over the letter. Irma had accused him of

swearing her father's life away, and she would be alone in the world, as he was.

"I wish I hadn't 'a' done it!" muttered the boy. "There is folks enough mis'ble now without me makin' more. I'm sorry for them two, an' I reely wish I hadn't 'a' done it!"

CHAPTER VI.

SIM VISITS THE JAIL.

Few people in Black Bluffs did anything that day except to talk about the arrest. Opinion was divided. Some exulted, and declared that Redmond was just the man to commit such a crime as murder, while others were very reluctant to believe that the man Mary Barnard had selected as her husband could be such a villain.

All agreed that it was very sad for Irma. It was generally understood that Erwin Redmond, whether sinner or saint, had been unlucky financially and otherwise, and that he was without money or friends.

In case he was found guilty of murdering Barnard, and dealt with accordingly, the child would be badly left, even though she was heiress to all that had been Barnard's. Few believed that her heirship would do her any good—the old squire, hating Redmond as he did, had doubtless made a will which left his property to some one else.

Wickes, the detective, managed to come in for a share of the glory of capturing Redmond, though why he deserved it no one knew. He had admiring Mr. Hughes to state that he had correctly described the "assassin"—"merely from instinctive reasoning and corroborative discoveries," as the detective expressed it.

There were those ungenerous enough to say that Wickes had based his deductions wholly on what Sim had said about the man in the boat; but Wickes bustled about, talked a good deal, and shone as a sort of human meteor.

The constable said but little, and gave Surly Sim due credit. He had learned of Redmond's presence in a neighboring town, but had not thought himself justified in making an arrest until Sim gave him the letter.

Nobody else gave any credit to Sim, and he did not want it—he did not think he deserved it. If he could have had that letter back, unread, no one would ever have seen it. Reared as he had been, his sense of legal right and wrong was not sharply defined, but the memory of Irma and her grief overweighed all else.

Time and again he wished he could undo his work.

He was a believer in Erwin Redmond's innocence.

Irma had said her father was not guilty, and the boy thought that the pale gentleman's delicate face went to prove as much. He did not look like a villain, anyhow.

That evening the boy spent two hours at the hotel, and people never found him more unsocial. They wanted to ask him many idle questions about his trip across the river with Redmond, and the finding of the letter, but they might as well have questioned the Sphinx.

He thought that he had done damage enough, and did not intend to say anything more.

Late in the evening he slipped away. No one had the curiosity to ask where he was going, but they would have been surprised had they known what was in his mind.

He had learned where Irma was housed, and he went directly to the house, but not inside. This was far from his purpose. The people of the house ranked high, and he would not have been admitted, anyway. But he did not wish to enter—what he wanted was to get speech with Irma privately.

Going near the window he saw her sitting with the family, but not engaged in conversation. Her head rested on one hand, and she was looking at vacancy with such a sad expression that Sim felt more guilty than ever.

"I'm the cause o' that!" he thought, bitterly. "I wish I'd 'a' known ernough ter keep my tongue still!"

Suddenly Irma aroused. Some one had spoken to her, and a few words passed between them. Then the girl and the lady of the house arose, and the latter conducted Irma to a room on the second floor. This was doubtless to be her sleeping-room, and Sim lost sight of her.

"No use to wait longer," he thought. "I sha'n't see her ter-night anyhow."

He had come with that very purpose in mind, and he was so reluctant to go that he hovered near until the rest of the family retired. Then he thought of going in earnest, but paused as the rear door of the house cautiously opened.

He looked with new interest.

Some one came out and, after a moment's hesi-

tation, advanced directly toward him. He stood closer to the trees to escape notice, and then felt greatly surprised as he saw that it was Irma.

She came straight on and sat down on a rustic bench not ten feet away. Here was the chance. He wished to speak with her, but he hesitated to make himself known. But suddenly a new sound came from the friendless girl—a sob. She was wretched, desolate and friendless. The boy's heart bounded; here was one as badly used by the hard world as he.

Impulsively he started forward, but she uttered a startled cry and shrunk back.

"Don't be afeard!" he said, quickly. "Nobody'll hurt ye."

Irma looked at him closely.

"I know you," she said. "You're the boy who swore my father's life away. I should think you would be ashamed to let me see you."

"I am," said Sim, humbly. "I'm ershamed, an' I'm sorry. I didn't think what I was doin' an' didn't know anything about you then."

"You knew my father."

"I never seen him till we was at the hotel."

"Couldn't you tell that he was a good man?"

"I didn't think o' that till you come in, an' then I was sorry. I dunno why I need mix in, anyhow, for I orter to side with them as is in trouble—I know how ter feel fur them. I wish I had fell inter the river an' been drowned afore I ever said anything about it."

His humble air had due effect on Irma.

"If you are sorry, I won't blame you," she said. "Father always taught me not to blame folks."

"I be sorry."

"What is your name?"

"Sur—I mean, Sim Wallace."

"Simeon, did you say?"

I b'lieve that's it, but they always calls me Sim. You see, nobody has a good word fur me, fur I ain't got no friends, an' any name is good enough fur me."

Irma looked at him in wondering silence, but he suddenly assumed a more energetic tone and added:

"This ain't ter the p'int, though. What I want ter say is, I'm feeling very mean about the damage I've done, an' I want ter undo it. I b'lieve I can, too."

"You can?" cried Irma. "How?"

"By gettin' your father out o' jail."

"Can you prove that he is innocent?"

"I only wish I could. No, I can't; but I know a thing or two about that old jail. It won't hold a horse-fly ef he has a chance ter use his hands an' git away. Now, I presoom yer father is tied up, but we ain't, be we?"

"No, I am not."

"Nor me. Wal, it's jest ez easy ter break inter the jail as 'tis ter break out, an' ef you say the word, you an' we will go there an' git your father out. Then he can run away."

"Don't they blame folks for running away?"

"Folks runs, jest the same. Now, then, what do you say—shall we go and rescue him?"

Sim was no longer sullen or indifferent. The emergency was bringing out a quality for which no one had given him credit, and he looked to be as keen, wide-awake boy as there was in the town of Black Bluffs.

Irma had a vague idea that what he proposed was not right, but Sim developed a persuasive power new to him, and her scruples were soon overcome. She loved her father, and anything seemed better than to stay in prison and be tried for a crime of which she believed him guiltless.

She agreed to accompany Sim to the jail. The first part was easy enough, as she was not likely to be missed from the house. She had stolen out secretly after being left for the night, the open air seeming better than her close room, and the family would doubtless keep away until morning. So she agreed to Sim's proposal, and they started for the jail.

It was only a short distance, and its grim walls soon loomed up before them. Irma began to tremble, but Sim had never been cooler. If there was no guard inside he had no fears as to the result; he knew the jail of old, and knew its weak places too.

"I've got ter climb up that wall," he explained, "an' git inter the winder, but you needn't. You jest go 'round ter the door an' wait, an' I'll let you in pretty soon."

The girl went, and stood shivering by the door. She could hardly keep back her tears. The silence of the night frightened her, and the jail seemed the most terrible of places. Her heart beat like a trip-hammer, and she waited in fear and trembling.

It seemed an hour, though really less than one-half that time, when the door softly opened.

Sim stood on the threshold, and he softly told her to enter. She obeyed, and he showed a light which he had had covered up. Her pallor then attracted his attention.

"Don't be scared," he said, kindly. "You shall see yer father. Thar ain't nobody else here. We'll git him away all right, too, for this old jail ain't no more than a rat-trap. Them as calls it a jail don't know much about it, I guess."

He tried to speak cheerfully, and led the way along a passage until he reached a door which was fastened with bolts in a clumsy way. They made everything secure as far as the prisoner was concerned, but amounted to nothing in the present case. Sim paused for a moment and looked at the girl.

"You may go in alone," he said. "Yer father will be glad ter see ye, and I'd be in yer way. I wish you'd explain ter him that I'm sorry fur what I've did, an' say that he can go right away without trouble. An' he'd better go pretty quick, too."

So saying the boy raised the bolts and opened the door. Irma, holding the light, glided in, and Sim heard a wondering cry from the inside in Redmond's voice. Then he softly closed the door and began pacing back and forth in the dark.

"I hope he'll get safe away, an' I guess he will. I'll take him across the river, and then he kin take the train north."

All this seemed simple enough to Sim, who did not know the means that officers have of cutting off the flight of those they meant to capture.

It was nearly half an hour later when the door re-opened, and Irma appeared with the light and asked him to enter. He obeyed, and found Erwin Redmond there, free from bonds. The pale gentleman looked at him kindly.

"My boy," said he, "I owe you thanks, but I cannot consent to leave here."

"Eh?" said Sim, blankly.

"I am under arrest, and, though the charge is a serious one, I shall remain and meet my trial."

"D'ye mean that you won't run away?"

"Yes, just that. I'll stay and take the consequences."

Sim stared in blank wonder.

"There are several reasons for this," Redmond added, after a pause. "In the first place I should be captured, beyond doubt, and flight always looks like guilt. In the next place, I will not act the coward; I will face my accusers, let the result be what it may. I am innocent, and I hope to prove it."

"But they'll try mighty hard ter prove t'other way."

"Certainly, they will."

"I'd run, ef I was you. I hate ter see you here. I was ter blame fur gittin' ye here, an' I feel as mean as I can. I'd like ter do somethin' ter show ye I didn't mean no harm."

"My dear boy, you have fully proven it. I never thought of blaming you—you have only done your duty. Your good will has been fully shown, and I thank you very much."

Sim looked mournfully at the floor.

"This don't git ye out o' tronble," he said, gravely.

"I trust to justice."

"Thar ain't much on it 'round here."

"Possibly you, too, have tasted of misfortune."

"I ain't tasted o' anything else."

"Poor boy! you are to be pitied. I heard you mentioned as one alone in the world, and kicked around by all. I know well how to feel for you. My own lot has been— But never mind! Now, children, you must leave me. Go back to your homes, and never tell others of this night's work—you would be blamed. Thank you again, my boy—thank you, a thousand times—but I shall remain here and meet my trial!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STRUGGLE FOR THE BOAT.

SIM's face was very long, and it was clear that he was deeply disappointed. He had neither the training nor the experience to fully understand the motives which influenced Redmond, and the most vivid idea in his mind was that his efforts to undo the damage he had caused had utterly failed.

Redmond would remain in jail, and that meant to meet his trial, when all would probably go against him.

He accepted the inevitable as cheerfully as possible, and then the prisoner bade them both good-night. Irma was silently weeping, but

she had been accustomed to always obey her father, and she obeyed now. Redmond's parting with Sim was as kind as ever.

"Don't feel disappointed at my decision," he said, "for I am doing what my mind tells me is right. Better that I should remain and face my trial than be recaptured in ignoble flight. Do not blame yourself, my lad, for anything you have said, for you have acted right. My feelings toward you are of the kindest. Go, now, and be sure to leave no sign to tell of your visit here."

They went, and Sim restored all to its former condition. He then conducted Irma home, and his work was done for the night.

He was far from being satisfied, however.

"He's still in jail," the boy thought, referring to Erwin Redmond, "an' mebbe, they will hang him. I'm the cause o' all this, an' I feel mean enough ter kick myself. Why couldn't I 'a' minded my own business? I don't b'lieve he ever harmed Squire Barnard, anyhow!"

This idea had become firmly fixed in Sim's mind. He felt that there was no convincing proof against Redmond, and he set the evidence aside and judged him as a man. There all seemed in the prisoner's favor. He did not look like a criminal, and he had done what only one or two other persons ever did—spoken kindly to the boy with a bad name.

"He's an honorable gentleman, that's jest w'ot he is," Sim thought. "All these folkses who think he's guilty don't know what they're talkin' about, but how are they ter be showed that they're wrong?"

Here, indeed, was a poser. The tide had set against Redmond, and it is hard to turn the tide. Sim plainly saw that the chief hope lay in the discovery of the real assassin—if, indeed, Redmond was not he—and nobody was looking for such a person.

The boy fell to thinking. The constable had allowed Mr. Detective Wickes to tack his theories on to the other evidence, and it was believed that the murderer had ascended the big tree and gone in through the window, according to the description given by Wickes in his "instinctive" summary.

Sim did not believe this; he had never believed it. Although he had kept silent when Wickes was charming Mr. Hughes with his acuteness, the boy had mentally disagreed with nearly all Wickes said.

He did not believe the assassin had climbed the tree, or entered by the window, and if he was right Wickes's whole theory fell to pieces. If he was wrong, how had entrance been effected?

Sim considered this point, and came to the conclusion that the assassin had been admitted at the door by one of the household. This did not improve Redmond's case, but it gave rise to other ideas and questions. If thus admitted, was not the assassin known to those in the house? Was it not likely that he belonged in the village?

The boy thought "yes" would be the proper answer to both these questions, but another then arose. Who had let the assassin in? It might have been one of the servants, but they declared that no one had been near the house to their knowledge, and they were not only considered very honest people, but they had proved their devotion to the old squire by faithfully serving him for thirty years.

"The squire let the chap in, himself!" Sim exclaimed, speaking aloud.

This was an altogether new theory, but it rather operated against Redmond, of the two. It would have made a stronger claim for the prosecution than the one Wickes had so laboriously elaborated.

Sim, however, began to look for another person. Whom had the old squire admitted, unknown to his servants, only to meet death at his hands in the remote chamber?

The thought made the boy shiver, but he felt that if he could settle the identity of any one thus admitted, he would know who did the deed.

"I'm goin' ter look inter this," he added, earnestly. "I was the one that got Redmond inter trouble, an' it's my duty ter git him out. I will, too! He don't despise me 'cause I'm a nobody, an' don't call me 'Surly Sim.' I don't think I'd be surly ef ev'rybody used me like he's done. He's a kind man, an' I'm goin' ter find out who killed Squire Barnard an' git Redmond clear!"

He meant all he said, but the village people would have laughed at the idea of his finding the criminal.

The boy had been so deep in thought that, unconsciously, he had taken a course other than toward his room, but he did not realize this un-

til he came out on the river-bank and saw the stream rolling before him.

The quiet of the scene pleased him, and he sat down on a stone without any particular object in view. As he did so, the sound of oars attracted his attention. He looked and saw a boat on the river.

There was nothing strange about this, but he watched it with idle curiosity, wondering who was out. It reached the middle of the river, and then came to a halt. He saw the occupants stir, and surmised that they were going to try their luck at fishing.

A moment later, though, a peculiar sound reached his ears. He at once became more attentive.

"Sounds like an auger!" he muttered.

Sure enough; the resemblance was strong; and Sim wondered what it meant. Suddenly an idea struck him. Why should the unknown persons go out there to use an auger, unless it was their intention to scuttle the boat?

Sim sprang to his feet. He had no objection to any man sinking his own boat if he wished to, but it had occurred to the boy that he had a boat near there, and that it was possible for evil-minded people to destroy it.

He ran along the bank to where he kept his craft.

It was gone!

The last doubt vanished from his mind then. Some one who hated him had planned to deprive him of his only means of getting a living, and the work was then under way.

It is said the most patient of creatures will turn at bay if hard pressed, and so it was with him then. For years he had been abused by old and young, big and small, but indignation now overcame all other feelings.

Quickly he threw off his jacket and plunged into the water. He was as much at home there as a fish, almost, and he swam toward the scene of destruction with a speed possible only to such a swimmer. At the same time he took care to make as little noise as possible, for he wanted to catch the thieves.

As he neared the boat he discovered that the boring had stopped, and that two persons were talking.

"The bottom of the boat is as hard as a rock," said one of the two.

"You're weak in the arms."

"You can bore if you want to."

"I don't. Go on; you're doing well."

"You ought to take your turn."

"Ain't I keeping the water out of this hole?"

Do you want the boat full of it? Bore away!"

Sim knew those voices; he had heard them before. He knew the boat, too—it was his own. And he knew then that Adelbert and Algernon Abbott had come to destroy his boat to vent their petty spite upon him.

Algernon, who was using the auger, grumbly bent to his work again, but not a turn did he give it. Just then the boat rocked, and over the gunwale came Surly Sim, with an agile contortion of his body.

"I'd thank you to let my boat alone," he said, in a loud, clear voice.

Down dropped the auger to the bottom of the craft, and the vicious-minded brothers stared at the new-comer in surprise and alarm. They had not dreamed of being detected.

"Surly Sim!" gasped Algernon, blankly.

"Yes, it's me; an' I'd like ter know what you're doin' with my boat?" retorted Sim.

His gaze was on Adelbert, and that young rascal stupidly answered:

"Nothing."

"Maybe you call it nothin' ter steal it, but I don't."

"We ain't harming the boat," said Adelbert, weakly.

"What d'ye call borin' a hole through it?"

Adelbert had no answer ready. Sim loomed up above him, looking three times as large as usual, and he knew that he was in a very bad fix if the facts of the case were made known. It would be a terrible disgrace to the Abbotts.

"We only did it for fun," he said, "but I—I guess we have made a mistake."

"I guess you have," Sim retorted. "Folks usually do when they git ketched. If I was you I wouldn't carry my head so high arter this, bein' only a thief, an' wuss, too."

"I ain't a thief. Don't dare call me that!" and Adelbert became suddenly belligerent.

"That's just what you be—a thief an' a boat-scuttler!"

Adelbert sprang up and squared off as a pugilist.

"Take that back!" he cried.

"I won't take nothin' back!" Sim sturdily replied.

"Then take that!"

When Adelbert spoke he expected to hit his enemy full in the head, and his fist did start that way, but, somehow, it did not hit. Sim warded off the blow, and then he sprang forward and grappled with Adelbert. It was the first fight he had been in for years, but his inborn sense of manliness had been expanding in the last few days. He might be only a poor drudge, and Adelbert one of the great folks of the village, but the mutilation of the boat had been more than could be borne tamely.

The shock of the collision almost threw both boys out of the boat, but they recovered, and the struggle began in earnest. They fought like young gladiators.

Adelbert relied on his superior years, and expected to worst Sim at once, but he soon found that he had undertaken an exceedingly big job.

Sim was not large, but he was well made, and his muscle had been hardened by work in the very boat for which he was struggling. He met the older boy's every attack valiantly, and not a point did Adelbert gain, desperate as were his efforts.

They staggered back and forth in the boat, often nearly falling over the seats, while Algernon looked on in mute consternation.

It needed but a short time, however, to show that Adelbert was not fit for a long fight. His muscles were not toughened ones, and he not only grew weak, but his breath came in short gasps which heralded a total collapse.

"Hit him with an oar, Algernon!" he gasped, looking at his brother.

Algernon sprang up briskly. This work was just suited to his vicious mind, and he swung the oars aloft and watched for a chance to use it; but Sim was keenly alive to the danger, and he swung Adelbert around as a shield and averted the blow for awhile.

His adversary was furious. To be thus at the mercy of such a boy as Sim was bad enough, but when he remembered that he was two years older than Sim it was, indeed, gall and bitterness to his warped mind.

"Hit him! hit him!" he still said, to Algernon, feeling that his own powers were about gone.

"Try it, if you dare!" mocked Sam, entirely at his ease.

"Let me at him!" cried Algernon, almost whimpering.

"Come at me, then!"

But Algernon could not. Sim kept that human shield always in front of him, and the boy with the oar was helpless. Suddenly he had an idea, and he leaped upon one of the seats. This would bring him above his brother, and he hoped to be able to get a disabling blow at Surly Sim.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING SUSPICION.

SIM saw the danger as Algernon rose above them both, and realized the necessity of promptly averting it. He had no time for elaborate planning, but acted on the impulse of the moment and acted promptly.

Gathering all his strength he pushed Adelbert quickly backward, straight toward the third boy, and the shove was so resistless that he drove Adelbert into Algernon like a battering-ram.

There was a cry from the latter and he went overboard with a tremendous splash, and in a moment his brother followed to keep him company. Sim barely saved himself from taking the same course, but he managed to stop, and then saw both his enemies in the water.

Algernon began to yell lustily.

"Help! help!" he cried. "Help me, or I'll drown."

Sim coolly picked up an oar.

"It'll serve you jest right!" he commented.

But he soon saw that while the elder brother swam for the bank with some degree of skill, Algernon merely kicked about enough to keep afloat.

"I can't swim!" he cried, in terror. "Help! help!"

Sim relented at once. All his hardships had not served to harden his heart, and the moment that he saw that Algernon was really in danger he forgot his own wrongs. Promptly he plied the oars and swung the boat within proper bounds; then, seizing the yelling boy just as he was sinking, he drew him into the craft, safe at last.

Algernon dropped down, as limp as a rag. He was so badly frightened that all his strength was gone, and he could only lie there and groan lugubriously.

Sim now discovered that there was a good deal of water in the boat, and his searching fingers

soon found an auger-hole in the bottom. This he filled with his hat, and then dipped the oars and started for the east bank.

On the way he tried to decide what to do about the matter. He knew that he ought to have both boys arrested for trying to spoil his boat, but, once more, he thought of Algernon's mental weakness and felt that, vicious as the youth was, he was to be pitied. Possibly he did not realize the extent of his evil-doing.

This line of argument was very like Sim, who could never forget the misfortunes of the afflicted, and by the time the bank was reached his anger had abated a good deal.

The elder boy had disappeared, so Sim stirred up Algernon with an oar. That precious young scamp began to whimper and beg for mercy.

"I'd like ter know," said Sim, "why you hate me so. What did I ever do ter you that you should go an' sp'ile my boat? I'd like ye ter answer that."

"Oh! oh! I don't know."

"You'd better know, right away."

"I'm sorry, and we never will do so again."

"That don't mend my boat."

"I've got five dollars in my pocket, and I'll give you that if you'll let me off."

"I don't want yer money— Hold on, though! You hev done damage ter my pussonal property an' you orter pay fur it. That's 'cordin' ter business laws an' doctrines, an' I guess you are about right. But, see here: How am I ter know you won't merlest the boat ag'in?"

"I'll swear not to."

"Don't know ez that would amount ter much," said Sim, dubiously. "But, see here: I guess we can fix it. I'm goin' ter leave the boat at jest the same place ez before, an' I hope it won't be merlest. *Ef'tis*, I shall hev ye 'rested fur what you did this time. See?"

Algernon did see, and he was loud in his assertion that he would never trouble the boat again. He had had enough of it, and would thereafter let Sim alone. He also promised to tell Adelbert of the compromise fully—as long as the boat was let alone they were safe, but if harm came to it, he would have them arrested.

When this was fully understood, Sim gave his enemy permission to go, and Algernon beat a hurried retreat. He hated Sim as much as ever, but had learned that there was danger in attacking him.

Sim shook his head doubtfully when alone. He felt that he had been too merciful, but the lesson might prove strong enough so they would let him alone.

He hoped so; if they saw fit they could do him a good deal of harm. The sons of Jason Abbott were very much more powerful in the social world than the ferry-boy with a bad name.

Having arranged his boat as well as possible Sim went home, and the remainder of the night passed without adventure.

In the morning Sim took pains to listen to the gossipers at the hotel, and see if any one suspected the night visit to the jail, but there was nothing to indicate that it was known.

One thing he did hear which was of interest. Uncle Eben, the oracle, sat in the corner and repeated one statement time and again as auditors went and came.

"No, the old squire didn't leave any will—at least, Lawyer Edwards says he's sure not, for only a few days before Barnard died he asked him about it; so, of course, Irma Redmond is heiress to all."

"But her father says she shall never touch the property," some one would say.

"He will think better of it, and change his mind. Men usually do, when money is concerned," said Uncle Eben, with a wise nod of his head. "I have seen a good deal of the world, and I have traveled, gentlemen—I know what money will do."

"Had Edwards any idea who would have got the property, if there had been a will?"

"Well, the squire made a remark which was significant—*very* significant, I may say. Said he to Edwards, says he: 'All my relatives but one have been scheming for my money, and he don't know enough. I'd rather make a fool happy than a villain, any time.'"

"What did he mean by that?"

"As I argy it," replied Uncle Eben, shaking his index finger oracularly, "he meant Algernon Abbott!"

Surprise usually followed this statement, and nearly all advanced the same objections to the theory. When the Abbotts came to Black Bluffs the old squire had been outspoken in his theory that they came to lay siege to his property, and he had promptly put a wall of reserve between them and himself.

He had never entered their house, nor they

his—though they wanted to, badly enough—and beyond his gruff greetings to the elder Abbott, he had never noticed any of them, people said.

As for making Algernon his heir—why, he had never spoken to the boy.

"Makes no difference," the oracle would reply; "you have heard MY opinion, and I want to say that it is that of a man who has traveled a good bit!"

All this was heard by Sim Wallace, and it set him to thinking. It *did* seem odd that Squire Barnard, eccentric as he had been, should wish to leave his property to one with whom he had never spoken, and the matter dwelt in Sim's mind long after he left the hotel and was plying his boat on the river.

More than this, it gave rise to a mental question—had the old squire really never spoken with Algernon?

Sim studied on the subject. He remembered that Barnard had been secretive and eccentric, and Algernon was certainly sly. He had seen proof of this more than once. If the boy was deficient in some ways he was by no means a fool, and Sim was willing to believe him capable of any deception the old squire might have started.

Fast after this came recollection of his late theory that Barnard might have had a visitor, secretly admitted by himself, on the fatal night, and a startling possibility presented itself to Sim.

Could it be that the eccentric squire had been in the habit of having Algernon visit him, unknown to others, and that on the night of the tragedy—

But, no, no; this idea was too bad. Vicious Algernon might be, and was, but it was too much to suspect him of such a crime. And yet, now that the idea was started, Sim remembered that when returning from the outskirts of the village late one evening, some weeks before, he had seen Algernon near Barnard's.

He remembered thinking at the time that the boy had been to visit the squire, but memory of the fact had died away until it was thus recalled.

Sim could not get rid of the new ideas that were in his mind, and that noon he strolled up to the old house. Mrs. Nason, the female servant, was a kind old soul, and she had spoken rather kindly to Sim the day he was there to see Wickes.

Sim wanted to see her again.

He found her in the yard, and not reluctant to talk. She was deeply horrified by the late tragedy, but even that had not banished her fondness for talking. Nothing but her own death could.

She talked freely with the boy, always speaking well of her late master. He had been a kind, honorable man, she declared, though very eccentric. True, he had been a good deal harsher with Miss Mary when she married Redmond than seemed necessary, but that was only another proof of his eccentricity.

When opportunity occurred Sim referred with assumed carelessness to the rumors which said that Algernon Abbott was to have been the old man's heir.

"I don't know anything about that," Mrs. Nason replied. "The squire never spoke of him to us, but he did use to refer to his relatives who, as he called it, were waiting like buzzards for him to die, but he vowed that he'd 'cheat every beggar' of them in the end."

"And Algernon never used ter come here?"

"No. He was never in the house—never but once. Now I think of it I *did* see the squire letting him out by the back door one night. I declare! it had clean slipped my mind."

"How long ago was this?"

"Well, say four months."

Sim made a mental note of this. It was not over two months before that he had seen Algernon, and thought that he had just come from the house.

"He could 'a' come often an' you not know it, couldn't he?" the boy asked.

"Yes, laws! he didn't. The old squire didn't like them Abbotts any more than I do snakes."

This was all that Sim learned, but he went away with one idea firmly fixed in his mind. He believed that Mr. Barnard had been having Algernon at his house secretly for some time; he believed some visitor had been there the fatal night; and he asked himself one question over and over:

Was this visitor Algernon?

CHAPTER IX.

SIM'S STRANGE EXPERIENCE.

THE more the ferry-boy thought about the matter, the more convinced he became that he

had stumbled upon something worthy of more than passing notice. He was not ready to believe that Algernon had dealt the blow which killed Squire Barnard—if the boy had been a party to premeditated murder it was more likely that he had admitted some older confederate—but it seemed far more likely to Sim that Algernon was knowing to the deed than Erwin Redmond.

Still, it never entered his mind to go to Wickes or the constable with his story. Judging from his point of view, these men had all their attention fixed on Redmond, and would discard all evidence which seemed to point to others.

Certainly, he thought, they would never think of suspecting young Abbott.

"Whatever's done I've got ter do myself," he muttered, as he plied his oars on the river. "I'm the only one ter do it, an' it's my duty ter save Redmond, now I've got him inter trouble. I ain't a detective, an' I don't jestly know how ter go about it."

When night came he roamed uneasily about the village. He heard people say that the net was closing about the pale gentleman in the jail, and nobody but he gave a thought to any one else.

No wonder Sim was that night in danger of falling back into the moody state from which events had lately aroused him.

There was no system about his wanderings, and he finally found himself near Abbott's house. He looked at it suspiciously. Was the secret of Nathan Barnard's death hidden within those walls? Sim had none too good an opinion of any of the family, and he was ready to suspect them all.

He was about to go away when some one came out, and Sim easily recognized Algernon. The latter paused and looked about, but the watcher was concealed by bushes and remained unseen.

Then Algernon moved away, climbed the rear fence of the yard, and started across the field.

Where was he going? Sim mentally asked the question, for there were no houses in that direction, and then he made a resolution; he would follow and see what idea Algernon had in his mind. The nature of the field and the darkness would render pursuit somewhat easy.

Sim started, and he carried on the work with skill. Only for this he would have been seen, for the pursued frequently stopped and looked all around. Sim thought his manner very strange, though it might be owing to his mental weakness.

Algernon's course was a semicircle, and, after a wide detour, he approached the village on the north side. It seemed strange that he should make such a roundabout journey, and this, taken together with his furtive manner, caused Sim to grow doubly suspicious.

Another fact became impressed on his mind—the boy was heading directly for the late squire's home. This might mean nothing, for he might pass it, but—well, time would show.

It did show, for, when Algernon came near the house, he concealed himself in a thicket and proceeded to watch carefully. All the lights were out in the house, but he looked it over a long time before he ventured further. Finally, however, he left his cover, glided forward, and cautiously entered the yard.

Sim's interest became painful. Surely, all this meant something, and it seemed to point to the confirmation of all his suspicions.

He secretly followed.

Algernon went on until he reached the rear door—the place where Sim had reasoned that the assassin must have entered. There he made a long pause, listening and watching. What happened next was of intense interest to the young detective.

Algernon's hand went into his pocket, came out, moved toward the door, and then Sim heard the clink of metal against metal. He gave a start. Unless signs were very deceptive, *Algernon was unlocking the door.*

This was a startling revelation, for how had the other boy become possessed of a key? If he had not the good-will of the old squire, and had never been a visitor there, it was remarkable that he should have a key to the door.

Surely, there was something crooked about this.

The door swung open, Algernon hesitated for a moment, and then disappeared inside. Two points were definitely settled—he had means of entering, and he saw fit to do so secretly. Well might he be suspected of worse than was known!

The door closed, and Sim's spirits suddenly fell. Whatever Algernon was going to do, he had a chance to do freely despite him—of course he would lock the door, and then all that the de-

tective could do would be to await his return. Yet he heard no click of the bolt, and all was silent inside.

The moments wore away and all remained quiet, and then Sim suddenly moved forward. He wanted to know what the other boy was doing, and he could never learn by staying there. He would at least make sure that the door was locked before giving up tamely.

He reached it—listened. All remained silent. Then he tried the door.

The result surprised him; it was not locked.

Could it be that Algernon had discovered the pursuit and was laying a trap for him?

He slowly opened the door. All was dark inside, and he could neither see nor hear anything. He ventured further, and, looking where he knew the stairs to be, saw a band of light on the wall of the upper floor. Then he knew that Algernon had actually committed the grave mistake of not locking the door.

"It's lucky for me that the critter's wits run sharp only half the time," Sim thought. "What's he doin' up thar? I may git 'rested ez a burglar, but I do want ter know what he's up ter. An' I will!"

With this decision he closed the door, removed his shoes, and glided up the stairs. He knew he was running a good deal of risk, but the end seemed to justify the means. So he went on boldly, but cautiously.

"He's in the old squire's room!" muttered the boy, as he reached the upper hall. "This looks suspicious. Great Scott! I wonder wot's goin' on, anyhow!"

Algernon was in that particular room—the one where Mr. Barnard had slept for years, and where he had been struck down by the assassin's hand—and as Sim peered through the doorway, he saw him bending down near the bureau.

His hand went under the edge of the carpet, came out, and then he moved toward the front of the bureau. He stooped, fitted a key to one drawer, and slowly unlocked it.

Sim wished that Gray, the constable, had seen that. He argued that the key had been the old squire's; that he had always kept it concealed under the carpet; and that not even the faithful servants knew of the fact.

But Algernon *did*, and right here came in more important evidence; the fact showed that Algernon had been deeper in the murdered man's confidence than any one suspected.

"This don't look ez though Redmond is guilty!" thought Sim, triumphantly.

But all his attention was fixed on Algernon as the latter opened the drawer. Sim could see that it was filled with papers, neatly folded and packed away. Algernon now seemed to forget all else; he moved his light nearer, bent forward and began examining the papers. None seemed to require more than a passing glance, for they were discarded almost as soon as looked at.

So the work went on, and he examined paper after paper in rapid succession. It was clear that he was searching for some particular one, and as he failed to find it, he grew angry. Some of the papers were flung viciously aside as he saw that they were worthless.

If Sim had dared to leave, he would have gone for the constable, but Algernon might at any time end his work and leave the house.

It was better, Sim decided, that he should stay and see what was found.

The papers were not numerous enough to make the task one of hours' duration, and Algernon reached the last finally. He flung it angrily aside, and sat scowling at the lot with great disappointment expressed on his face.

Plainly, he had had all his work for nothing.

After a pause he opened the other drawers, but these had not been locked, and contained only wearing apparel. He reclosed them, arose, and thoughtfully put the key back where he had found it.

His manner now indicated that he was about to leave the house, and Sim softly retreated down the stairs and to the open air. He did not want to get locked in. Two or three minutes passed, and then Algernon passed out, locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and started away.

His conduct was as suspicious as ever. He lingered in the yard until satisfied that no one was near, and then went to the road. Sim expected that he would return home by the most direct route, but this was not the case. Taking the same roundabout course by which he had come, Algernon skulked across the field, apparently very much afraid of being seen, and finally crept into his own house like a thief.

It seemed that he wanted to deceive even his own friends.

Sim's work was done, but what he had seen

had left food for thought. His suspicions against Algernon were stronger than ever.

He had positively learned that the boy had means of entering the Old Stone House whenever he saw fit, and that he was no stranger there. He had known where the old squire's key was kept.

It looked very much to him as though young Abbott had been a guest there when Barnard was alive.

What he had expected to find in the drawer was not clear, but it had been developed that, though he was mentally deficient in some respects, he had a good deal of shrewdness in others.

"I'm goin' ter tell Gray 'bout this in the mornin'," thought Sim, as he walked home. "I didn't s'pose that young chap was bad enough ter kill anybody, but thar's somethin' 'bout him that needs explainin'. I know Erwin Redmond ain't guilty no more'n I be, an' this thing must be follered up till the real criminals are in his place. Looks ez though Algernon might bunk in jail pretty soon. I'll see Gray in the mornin'."

CHAPTER X.

A MOVE FOR REVENGE.

SIM did see Mr. Gray in the morning, but not in the way he expected. He always had his meals in his own room, doing nearly all his cooking himself, and he had just finished breakfast when there was a great clatter on the stairs, and the noise of loud talking, as though a good many persons were coming up.

He looked around in surprise, and then the door was flung open and the following men and boys marched in one after another; Constable Gray, Mr. Woods, Mr. Bigelow, Jason Abbott and his two sons.

Sim stared at them in wonder, but Bigelow, red-faced and excited, began to saw the air with his arms and talk in a voice much like a young cyclone.

"I protest against it, sir—I protest against it!" he declared, warmly. "It's an outrage, sir. I tell you this boy has human feeling, and—"

"So has that stove human feeling!" retorted Mr. Woods. "I tell you the boy is a scoundrel—a doubly-dyed scoundrel, sir—and all because he was never whipped enough. The boy who ain't whipped grows up a villain."

"Woods, you're an ignoramus!" shouted Mr. Bigelow. "Yes, sir, I mean it—an ignoramus. Much you know about boys, when you never had one of your own, and—"

"I've been tortured by other folks' boys—yes, sir, absolutely tortured by them—boys who were not whipped enough. They have made life a burden to me—"

"Nonsense! You are an old fogey, Woods!" "And you are a superannuated old fossilized nonogenarian!" cried the private solicitor.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, I beg that you will be calm," said the constable, afraid that the old gentlemen would come to blows. "I assure you that I will manage this affair with all possible delicacy. Sim, I regret to say that we shall have to search your room. A watch belonging to Mr. Woods is missing. Have you seen it?"

"Of course he hasn't seen it!" cried Bigelow.

"I'm about tired o' hearin' about that watch!" said Sim, in a tone of disgust. "I never set eyes on it in the world. Ef it'll do ye any good I wish you would s'arch fur it, an' hev the matter settled."

"That's the way to talk!" cried Bigelow, heartily, "and I'll wager five dollars you won't find it—"

"But he told me he had seen it," interrupted Adelbert.

"Bear this in mind, Uncle Bigelow," urged Abbott.

The old gentleman turned upon them fiercely, shaking his cane almost in their faces.

"Jason W. Abbott, what sort of a man do you call yourself?" he demanded. "What sort of a bringing-up have you given your precious cub? When I was a boy I should have been well chastised if I dared to break in when my elders were speaking, but you let your villainous offspring rule the roost, do you? That's the style nowadays, is it? Sir, if your ill-mannered cub was *mine*, I'd teach him better manners or use up a cart-load of sticks!"

"Bigelow," dryly observed Woods, "remember that you don't approve of whipping."

"I don't, in general: no, sir, I don't; but when I see a miserable boy wholly devoid of human feeling, I realize that the rod is his only salvation. He'll get my cane over his back if he interrupts me again!"

Abbott was horrified that his rich relative

should get into such a passion at him, and he saw the coveted fortune slipping away, but Gray once more calmed the storm.

Sim had seen and heard all, and the malevolent glances bent on him by the Abbott boys showed how they hated him. As he had never seen the watch, he was serenely confident as to the result of the search, and he bade the constable go ahead.

He did so, and proceeded to make a thorough search. This was no quick work, for there were many corners in the unfurnished room, but he went on bravely until—

Suddenly he stopped, hesitated with his hand in a space between the boards, and then turned about with a gold watch dangling from a chain in his hand.

"Mine!" cried Woods, exultantly. "That's my watch. I knew this young rascal had stolen it. Who was right? Speak up, Bigelow—what have you to say, now?"

"I've got somethin' ter say now!"

It was Sim who spoke, and his voice rung out loud and clear. His eyes were flashing, and his gaze was bent indignantly upon Algernon. He remembered the little villain's visit by night to his room, and understood at last why he had come there.

The mystery was made plain at last.

"I'm the victim o' a conspiracy!" he cried, "an' thar is the mis'ble critter that's done it!"

He pointed full at Algernon, who cowered back to his father's side. Even with all this backing he was very much afraid of the boy he had wronged.

"I ketched him in this room t'other night, sneakin' around like—"

"I never was here before!" cried Algernon, with as good an assumption of virtuous indignation as was possible.

"I'm ready ter swear ter all I say—"

"Who'd believe *you*?" sneered Adelbert.

"I would!" thundered Mr. Bigelow, in a voice which seemed heavy enough to raise the shingles off the roof. "I'd believe him anywhere for he is a boy with human feeling. Speak up, Sim, and tell your story, and I'll cane the chap who interrupts you—yes, *cane* him, sir, by George!"

And he glared around, and swelled with wrath until he grew as red in the face as a lobster.

Sim did tell his story, describing Algernon's midnight visit in full, and then the Abbott boys had their turn. Algernon denied the charge point-blank, and Adelbert said that Sim had told him that he had seen the watch, and would undertake to restore it for twenty-five dollars.

This statement was denied by Sim, but Gray shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's a clear case," he said.

"It is *not* a clear case," cried Mr. Bigelow. "It's a foul, muddy case—an infernal muddy case, sir. It reeks with lies told by those two villains—yes, I mean your two cubs. Jason W. Abbott, this would never have happened if your offspring had been properly brought up. Hang it, sir, such boys as they ought to be whipped fourteen times a day. As for this measly old watch—Woods, you won't make a charge?"

"Certainly, I shall," Woods declared.

"Then, sir, your connection with me ceases from this hour. I discharge you, sir, by George. D'ye hear me?"

"I am not to be intimidated, Mr. Bigelow, sir," blustered Woods.

"Nor am I, sir. By George, the man who touches this boy walks over my lifeless body, sir; yes walks over *me*!"

The choleric old gentleman ran his fingers through his white hair until it stood on end, and glared fiercely at all the others except Sim.

"Mr. Bigelow pray listen to reason," began Gray, persuasively but he got no further.

"I won't listen to reason; I won't listen to nobody; but if Woods don't withdraw his charge, I'll challenge him to a duel and run him through the first round."

"Nothing would please me better," said valiant Mr. Woods. "We will fight to the death, sir."

"And afterward, too, by George!"

The constable began to think he had two madmen for his companions, but Abbott came to the rescue. His sons had involved him in an affair he would gladly have avoided, for he saw the danger of hopelessly angering his rich relative, but there now appeared to be one chance of recovering his lost ground. He suggested that, as long as the watch was recovered, the matter be dropped, giving the very meek excuse that the watch might have been caught in Sim's coat unknown to him.

Woods blustered still further, but he was not half so hard-hearted as his conduct indicated,

and he yielded a point and said that he would let the matter rest.

Sim had been listening to all, and his indignation at the conduct of Adelbert and Algernon had not abated. They had found a way to be revenged on him for past humiliations, and it was no use to tell now about their attempt to destroy his boat.

No one would believe him, unless it was Bigelow.

Once he did open his lips to tell of Algernon's secret visit to Barnard's house the night before, but he thought better of it, and said nothing. The trouble between him and the Abbott boys had taken the form of a regular fight, and he determined to wait until he had Algernon fully in the net before speaking.

He had a word to say about the withdrawal of this last charge, however.

"I ain't goin' ter accept no sech mercy as this, and afore you two gentlemen leave here I'm goin' ter be tried, I be. A pardoned thief ain't a very 'spectable chap, an' I don't hanker ter be one. I'm goin' ter satisfy ye I'm innercent."

"Hear! hear!" cried Bigelow. "This is a boy with human feeling. Go on, my lad! I'm with you."

"That's all I've got ter say now."

"I'm sorry of it, by George! I'd like to see you mount the stump, as it were, and make a speech. I'll bet you could give points to Cicero and Demosthenes, and then whip them. Mr. Gray, sir, I am a judge of boys. Here is one who is quiet, polite, and respectful to his elders. Such a boy is bound to make an honorable man, maybe to be a judge and sentence criminals who were saucy, disrespectful boys when they were young."

He looked significantly at Adelbert and his brother, and Jason Abbott thought it time to suggest an adjournment. Gray was also of this mind, and Woods settled his choice by marching out with his watch tightly clutched in his hand.

Adelbert and Algernon looked dumfounded; they had ingloriously failed in their attempt to put him out of the way by getting Sim into jail.

Mr. Bigelow looked thoughtfully at the ferry-boy.

"You charge three cents for rowing a passenger over the river, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're poor?"

"I be, sir."

"I want you to row ten men over the river."

"Thank you. Where are they, sir?"

"Here! I am the ten men, or, if you row me across ten times, it will be equivalent to it. I perceive that you are a boy of human feeling, and I want to give you a rise, but those who get my help must deserve it, and those who get my money must earn it. Come on, and row me across the river ten times."

Jason Abbott and his sons looked greatly troubled, but they dared not protest.

"What shall I do, uncle Abbott?" Jason asked, with an air of pleasant attention.

"I'd advise you to go home!" growled the old gentleman, and then he and Sim walked off.

Their bargain was scrupulously kept. Five times Sim rowed Mr. Bigelow over; five times he brought him back. And then the thirty cents he had earned were promptly paid him. All the while they were on the river Bigelow talked steadily, and Sim was surprised to see how pleasant he could be. He asked the boy many questions, and thus obtained the story of his life and struggles, to all of which he listened attentively.

He was still his old self, only he now had no one to quarrel with, and when the last trip was made he addressed Sim with rough kindness.

"Now, my boy, don't you be cast down by this late unpleasantness, for I know you're innocent. That Woods is a cranky fossil—a regular fossil, by George—but his bark is much worse than his bite. Don't be afraid of him, my boy, for he dares not harm you if he would—not when I am around. By George, no, sir!"

"I intend ter prove that I'm innercent, Mr. Bigelow," said Sim, earnestly.

"Do it, my lad! I'll back you up, every time, for I see you have a pile of human feeling. I'll see you again, and, maybe—but never mind, never mind!"

He waved his cane in farewell and trotted away.

CHAPTER XI.

A DESPERATE CHASE.

Sim's late experience showed him how much he had to fear from the Abbott brothers. They hated him bitterly and would do all in their

power to injure him, and it was necessary for him to be on the alert. Had it not been for Mr. Bigelow's strong, but apparently purely obstinate, defense, he would have been in jail already, as the result of their plotting.

Perhaps when they struck again, they would make sure of their victim.

Algernon now stood branded in Sim's eyes as a thief, if nothing more. Of course it was he who placed the watch in Sim's room, and how had he come by it if not by stealing?

He had played a bold game to get Sim into trouble, only fail by a hair's breadth. This had had the effect of arousing Sim still more, however, and he determined to make every effort to show up the young scamp in his true colors. More than ever now though, he felt that he must work alone; if he told the constable about Algernon's night visit to Barnard's he would probably ascribe it all to revenge and believe no part of it.

"I've got ter git more evidence first," thought Sim, "but whar be I ter begin?"

This seemed a question easier asked than answered, but he fell to thinking about the key with which Algernon had opened the outside door at Barnard's, and it seemed so strange that he should have such a key that Sim finally began to wonder if he had not got it by some trick.

Further meditation gave the boy a new theory and when he left the ferry he made his way to the shop of the village locksmith. This man had given the boy with a bad name more than one cuff over the ears in the past, but Sim's stock had gone up in the last few days.

As an important witness in the murder trial he was far more of a dignitary than he had ever expected to be, and all the men of the place were glad to talk with him and try to get points.

This was just the case with the locksmith, and he received the boy very kindly and opened on the usual subject. Was Sim sure that his passenger of the fatal night had been Erwin Redmond?

He found Sim unusually talkative, but the lad managed to say a good deal without saying anything of importance.

When this subject had been exhausted the visitor succeeded in dropping it without creating suspicion, and to turn their remarks in a channel far more interesting to him. They talked about the locksmith's business, and Sim gradually approached the desired point.

"I s'pose you make a good many keys?"

"Piles of them."

Sim knew this was an exaggeration, but it was of no consequence.

"Mostly o' house-doors, I s'pose?"

"Yes."

"I ain't rich enough ter need my doors locked; nobody would steal from me."

"You ain't got silver, like the Adkinses, the Snows, the Abbotts and the Raymonds."

"You make a good many keys fur them, don't ye?"

"Heaps of them."

"Didn't I see Allen Snow in hyar t'other day?"

"Yes. He wanted an extra latch-key."

"B'lieve I seen Algernon Abbott in once."

"Not lately. He was in about a month ago."

"Ter git a key made?"

"Yes. Key to cellar-door, I believe. It was not to their front door, for I had just made one for that."

"Did he bring one fur you ter copy from?"

"Yes, though he didn't leave it. He was in a hurry, and said he couldn't leave the key; and asked me if I could make one from an impression. I could, and did, and there's the bit of wax I used for the impression."

He lifted it from his bench for a moment, and then tossed it carelessly aside, but Sim picked it up and looked with more interest.

"That's a funny-looking thing."

"Rather."

"May I have it?"

"Why, certainly; take it along."

"Thank you. Rather a queer key, I should say. I s'pose you would know this if you's ter see it ag'in?"

"I could tell it if it was mixed up with a hundred others, almost like it."

Right here Sim's interest in the conversation ended, but he remained ten minutes later and talked on other subjects so that the locksmith would suspect nothing. When he went away the man looked after him thoughtfully.

"That boy is really beginning to develop. I never suspected there was so much to him, and he is actually getting polite. I wonder if we haven't been more to blame than he for making

him 'Surly' Sim? I guess I should be surly if I was kicked about as he has been."

And the locksmith was about right.

Sim went away feeling that he had gained an important point. Of course he was not sure that the key which the locksmith had made would fit Barnard's door, but he believed it would. He thought that Algernon's haste was to be accounted for by the theory that he had spirited away the original key, and dared not keep it long.

After some meditation he determined to watch the Old Stone House again that night, to see if Algernon visited it, and nine o'clock found him concealed close at hand.

There he waited patiently, but time rolled on and nobody appeared. At eleven o'clock his faith wavered, and when the village time-piece on the old church struck twelve he gave it up.

"He won't be hyar ter-night. I'll go home an' sleep. Wonder what Constable Gray would do ef I tol' him what I hev found out? Would he go fur Algernon? Most likely rot, though ef he could find that key on him it would rather be a staggerer fur Algernon. But that cunnin' critter has most likely got the key hid som'ers."

While thinking thus Sim was leaving the vicinity, and proceeding along the street to the central part of the village. The coming of a team caused him to step well out of the way, and the vehicle dashed along toward him at a lively pace.

"Don't know the outfit—strangers ter Black Bluffs, I reckon," thought the boy.

Just then a childish voice pealed out from the carriage:

"Help, Simeon! They've stole me. Help; I'm Irma Redmond, and—"

The voice died away in a muffled sound, an oath followed in a man's voice, and then a whip descended sharply on the horse, which sprung away at increased speed.

Sim stood for an instant like one dazed, but a realization of the truth speedily sent the blood bounding through his veins. The speaker had been Irma—he had recognized her voice, though it was somewhat changed by fear—and he had her own explanation of the situation.

She had said that the men had stolen her, and their own subsequent actions went to confirm this assertion.

The boy's indignation arose at once, and he gave a shout and bounded after the carriage. What he intended to do if he overtook it he did not exactly know—he only realized that Irma was being borne away by enemies, and he intended to frustrate them.

His lithe young legs shot forward with surprising rapidity, and for a few moments he gained on the fugitives. He got within twenty feet of the rear wheels, and there he seemed to stay. Try as he would he could gain no more.

Two or three times he sent out a cry for help, but the only reply was in the shape of oaths from the carriage. The hour was late and houses but scattering along there, and no one appeared, to aid him.

No further sound came from Irma, but he felt sure this was because they prevented her from crying out, and his zeal to help her did not abate. He had a very kindly feeling for her, and here was a chance to make amends for getting Mr. Redmond into trouble.

The chase continued and the village was soon left behind, but one fact impressed itself upon Sim's mind; though he might keep pace with a horse for awhile he had not the endurance to do so any great length of time, and both his "wind" and his strength began to fail.

The case grew desperate.

He could not run much longer, and no one else was to be seen to act as a rescuer.

Just as he was about to give up in despair he saw a horse by the roadside—an animal he well knew. It belonged to one Amos Briggs, but as Amos was "shiftless," and the horse was supposed to be worthless, he followed the practice of letting his noble steed wander in the road every night.

When Sim saw him his resolution was taken in a moment; this animal must be pressed into service. True, report said he was good for nothing, but in his day he had been a race-horse, and some of his old speed might be left.

Sim knew him well enough to be aware that he was docile, and could be ridden without a bridle.

He rushed up to the old horse, which looked at him with calm indifference, and sprang upon his bare back. Then he endeavored to start him after the carriage and get him into a good pace. The first was easy enough, for "Tornado," as the ex-race-horse was called, started promptly, but when he went out of a trot it was

some like galloping a saw-buck; the gait was unnatural, eccentric and slow, and nobody seemed more astonished than the old horse to find himself called upon to make good time.

Sim, however, meant business, and he yelled and drove his heels into Tornado's ribs at a great rate. The deliberate motions of the horse, and his reproachful look over his shoulder, were very aggravating.

Oh! was there no speed in the beast? Was it impossible to get him in motion? Must Irma be given up?

The last thought was like a stab to the boy, and he redoubled his efforts. They *must* go!

And they did go. Tornado ceased looking around, gave his head an indignant shake, and then, pointing his nose to the front, where it belonged, he began to handle his legs in some kind of style. It was the first time in years that he had been asked to show speed, and recollections of the old days, when he ran in the wild scramble over the race-course, probably flashed through his mind.

Be that as it may, he began to go, and Sim kept his place and urged him on with foot and voice.

Faster and faster went the relic of bygone days, as though anxious to prove himself something more than a relic. The village boys, who had long sneered at poor old Tornado, would have been amazed to see him then.

Faster and faster yet! The old fire of battle was burning in his veins, and he settled down to business like a hero. His gait was not so smooth and free as when he ran a mile under saddle in 1.46 for the Liberty cup ten years before, but it was a fact that he was getting over the ground at an astonishing rate.

Fences, houses, rocks and trees seemed to flit past like phantoms, and the resurrected race-horse left a stream of fire behind him where his iron-shod hoofs struck loose stones.

On, on he thundered, and Sim yelled with delight as he saw the carriage again. It had temporarily disappeared, but Tornado was running it down in great style.

Sim clung to his mane like a burr—it was the only hold for his hands; but this and the grasp of his heels was enough to keep him in place. What cared he for a bridle?

Evidently he was causing alarm in the carriage. He saw the men look around often, and he could surmise why. Not knowing that an unarmed boy was the pursuer, they feared the worst.

Tornado cut down the distance steadily. His eyes were flashing with the spirit of youth, and his old legs seemed gifted with new and wonderful power. Gallant old Tornado! It was a noble race you ran that night!

But the kidnappers were not inclined to be idle in this emergency, as Sim soon learned. He saw one of them turn in his place, and also thought that he could discern an outstretched arm, but he did not suspect the truth until a flash broke the darkness by the carriage, and something whistled past his ear.

Then he knew the truth—they intended to shoot him down!

CHAPTER XII.

SIM TACKLES A BIG JOB.

NOT until that moment had Sim stopped to think how desperate might be the character of the men he was pursuing, but the whistling of the bullet past his head was a revelation he could not very well misunderstand. The strangers were thorough ruffians, and he could expect no mercy at their hands.

In this critical moment he was tested and not found wanting; his courage did not waver a particle; and instead of trying to stop Tornado in alarm, he gave a whoop and let the old race-horse dash on as fast as ever.

An angry exclamation came from the marksmen, and then another shot, but it went as wide as the first.

"No use!" said a voice from the carriage. "Better save the others for close quarters, and then give it to him plump center."

A muffled cry came from Irma, but what she tried to say Sim could not tell.

Tornado was still gaining, and the pursuer wondered what he would do when the remaining gap was closed up. He was an unarmed boy against two men, and one, at least, had a revolver. The odds were terribly against him, but there was still no sign of wavering. The one great idea in his mind was to redeem his reputation from the disgrace as he called it—of having placed Redmond in trouble.

Nearer yet he drew, the old race-horse stretching out wonderfully. He knew now why he

was running; the sight of the team revived stirring memories of the old days, and his great ambition was to run down the pursued.

He bade fair to do it, too.

Suddenly one of the kidnappers turned around.

"See here, Mister Man," he cried, "if you want to see daylight again, you'd better hold in right there."

"Give up that girl!" shouted Sim, as commandingly as though he had a regiment of soldiers back of him.

"Never!"

"Yes, you will."

"I say we won't, and if you don't keep back we'll shoot you dead."

"Shoot away!" Sim recklessly replied.

"You're a fool!"

"An' you're a villain!"

"Talk is cheap, but you'll be a dead man in five minutes if you don't let us alone. For the last time, I warn you to keep back. If you don't do it we will shoot you!"

"Go ahead! I'm armed with two shootin'-irons, myself, an' I guess I kin hold my end up. Blaze away, whenever ye feel like it!"

Sim was so excited that he hardly knew what he said, and his plans were still unformed. He did not have a ghost of a weapon, and, to all appearances, he was riding straight to his death.

By this time Tornado's nose was at the rear wheels of the carriage, and he gathered himself for a final effort. According to the custom of his racing days it was his duty to pass the rival horse, and he intended to do it.

He turned his head so as to have open space, and then, inch by inch, he began to lap the carriage. He was breathing laboriously, but he forgot all that in the wild excitement of the race.

Still further to the front he forged until side by side with the vehicle, but no one thought of watching his efforts any longer. The man with the revolver was grimly holding his fire until he could make a sure thing of it, and he now thrust his weapon forward.

As he did so he suddenly paused.

For the first time he saw the pursuer distinctly.

Two amazed words fell from his lips:

"A boy!"

"Yes, sirree, a boy!" shouted Sim, and then he made an agile leap and shot from Tornado's back directly into the carriage. "I'm a boy, an' I'm with ye!"

He was with them, but what he was going to do next he did not know. Their astonished pause gave him an idea, and as he saw the revolver almost at his hand he suddenly stooped and snatched it away.

Another moment and he had turned it upon its owner.

"Surrender, or I'll sink yer hull outfit!" he cried.

At that moment there was rattle, a clatter and a roar, and utter darkness fell upon them all. They had dashed into a covered bridge which spanned the river, and no one could see his neighbor, there.

Suddenly, however, the scene changed. Gallant old Tornado, struggling for the lead with fast-falling legs, had actually pushed his nose two feet ahead of the other horse, thus plainly winning his race, but his presence on the right hand had naturally forced the carriage horse out of his proper track, and partially into that of teams going the opposite way. Everybody was now reminded of that fact.

Without the least warning there came a shock and a crash, and Sim's feet flew out from under him like a flash, and he shot over the dash-board.

What might have been a serious fall was averted by chance—he hit upon the horse, and from there bounced to the planks of the bridge without injury.

So suddenly did all this happen, however, he was dazed for a moment and thought that an army of demons was let loose. He could hear horses galloping on the bridge, and men swearing loudly, and then another sound arose which he knew to be the weeping of a girl.

This stirred him to action in a moment, and he sprang in the direction of the sound.

"Irma! Irma!" he cried.

The sobbing stopped at once.

"Oh! Sim, is it you?"

"Yes, yes; it's me. Whar be you?"

But even as he spoke a small hand touched his own, and he knew that it was Irma at last. "Oh! let us get away!" cried the girl. "We shall be killed if we stay—"

"Hush! Don't speak so loud!"

Sim was on the alert now. He had Irma under his care at last, but evidence was vouchsafed

that her captors were still moving and full of mischief.

"I'd like to get my hands on the infernal villain who run into us!" declared one, "but I reckon his horse has run away with him. Hope he'll break his neck. Our carriage is shattered, and we can't—"

"Never mind that. Where is the girl, and that boy?"

"Curse that young cub! I'll wring his neck."

"Better get him first. Where are they? Stealing away, perhaps, and we must put a stop to that. Listen!"

They did so, but Sim had whispered to Irma and they were as still as the grave.

"We must set out and find them. You go one way, and I'll take the other."

"Wait! Have you a newspaper in your pocket?"

"Yes."

"Bring it out. I'll bet something they are hiding along the side of the track, and we'll have a light and see."

As Sim and Irma were not over thirty feet distant, this was a startling prospect for them.

"We've got ter run fur it," said the boy. "Wait! don't hurry. Start easy, an' sneak it as fur as we can, an' then when you hear me say 'Git!' you just do so like a house on fire."

"I will," bravely, but cautiously, whispered Irma.

"Come on!"

And away they glided like two phantoms. Luck was against them, however; unknown to them a piece of the wrecked carriage was directly in their path, and Sim drove his shoe against a board with a dull thump.

"Hallo!" cried one of the men, "there they be. After them, Sam, and if you get a chance, knock that boy over the head as you would a mad bull. Go it!"

Long before this was wholly said Sim and Irma were in flight. Holding to each other's hands they ran rapidly through the bridge, unheeding the darkness and the possibility of another collision, but as they went it dawned upon Sim's mind that the worst of the matter was yet to come.

When they emerged from the bridge the pursuers would be able to see them easily, and it would be but a short task to run them down.

This must be prevented—but how?

If he had been alone he would have taken to the river and run his chances there, but it was not to be thought of in the present case. Neither could he see any way of escape if once clear of the bridge.

"I've got ter turn 'round," he thought, "but them pesky skunks will gobble me up right away ef I do, unless—"

He paused as he saw the light ahead which showed the end of the covered way. The steps of the pursuers sounded close at hand. Capture seemed unavoidable. All that was combative in the boy's nature came to the front, and he spoke hurriedly to Irma.

"Dodge past 'em! I'll 'tend ter their case!"

And he meant to do so with a will. He had no weapon, but he had thought of a way by which he could make himself obnoxious, if nothing more.

He proceeded to act upon it.

As the men rushed forward he suddenly stooped and bounded forward like a flash. The noise made by the men enabled him to locate them, and he shot right at the legs of one, knocking him off his feet as though he had been a ten-pin. Down he came with a crash and a yell of rage.

"Catch the little demon!" he yelled.

His friends started to obey, but Sim's eyes were wide open. Leaping forward he gave the man a push, sending him headlong against his struggling companion, and as they collided both went over in a heap.

"Irma!" cried Sim.

"Here!" breathed the girl.

He ran forward, seized her hand, and then both hastened away at full speed. Their faces were now toward Black Bluffs, and if they could only continue all would be well. But the voices of the kidnappers sounded not far behind in angry dispute.

"Come on!" urged Sim. "We've got ter hoof it while we can. Wish we could find one o' the hosses, an' so git a good start."

"One of the horses went back."

"Be you sure?"

"Yes, I think it was yours."

"Hope so, or I'll git taken in for burglary and arson, or whatever— Hi! they're arter us, ag'in!"

Sure enough, the feet of the men rung on the

bridge in swift pursuit, and the old trouble bade fair to be repeated.

"It's no use," said Sim, between his teeth, "them chaps won't let us alone until they've been wal licked, an' I'm jest the feller that is goin' ter tackle the job!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BROUGHT TO THE BAR.

BRAVE as he was, nobody knew better than Sim that this unequal fight could not long be kept up. If he had been alone he could have taken to his heels and laughed at the two men, but it was very different with Irma.

How was she to be saved?

The men were close upon them and running room getting small unless they left the cover of the bridge, and Sim saw no way only to try and make good his last threat.

He had turned partly around when the bridge began to shake, and a heavy clatter was added to the noise made by the quartette.

"A team!" exclaimed one of the men. "Lay low till it passes."

Sim pressed Irma's hand.

"It's jest the hickory fur us!" he said, in a whisper. "We'll git a ride ef thar's room, an' ef thar ain't, t'other folks will, at least, take our part ag'in' them desperadoes."

"Maybe they're bad, too," suggested the girl.

"Guess not; anyhow, we'll try our luck. Here, stop right whar we be, an' we'll try the coat on."

They crouched at the end of the bridge, looking back sharply to see that their enemies did not steal upon them, but those individuals had become very quiet. The team steadily approached, and Sim prepared to stop them. They must be stopped—it was the only hope of the two young adventurers.

Nearer came the strangers with their horse swinging along at a good pace, and the decisive moment was at hand. Sim felt terribly anxious. Would their enemies give up tamely, or carry the matter to an extreme?

Suddenly the boy moved forward.

"Please hol' on a minute, mister!"

The horse gave a slight shy, but was promptly checked, and Sim saw with great pleasure that the wagon was double-seated and contained two men.

"Hello!" cried one, "who's all this?"

"A girl an' a boy, and we want ter ride," Sim promptly answered. "Two villains stole her, an' I want ter git her safe back ter Black Bluffs. Ef you'll do it—"

He was talking somewhat vaguely, but at this point he was interrupted. One of their enemies strode forward from the darkness.

"What new lie is this, Bob Brooks?" he cried, addressing Sim. "Don't you take any stock in what he says, gents; he's the worst liar in this State. Here you, Bob, come along and stop fooling these gentlemen."

He made for Sim, but the latter flourished his fists belligerently.

"Don't you dar' tech me. Keep off, or it'll be the wu'ss fur you. Mister, jest you take this girl in, an' I'll look out fur myself; but don't let them steal her again."

"Nonsense! The girl is my daughter, and the boy is—"

"I am not your daughter!" cried Irma. "Oh! please, sir, won't you take me in and save me from these dreadful men? They have stolen me."

The strangers had seemed very uncertain with so much contradictory talk, but one of them now spoke decisively:

"We'll certainly protect you till the merits of this case are decided. Jump in, little girl. Now, then, if you want to tell your rival stories, just toot away!"

"They've stolen me?" repeated Irma. "Oh! won't you take me back to Black Bluffs?"

"Don't believe her," said the kidnapper. "She don't live at Black Bluffs at all. She's my daughter."

"She don't seem very affectionate," the stranger dryly said.

"She's a very willful child."

"Gents," very coolly put in Sim, "you're head-in' for Black Bluffs, an' it's the easiest thing out ter settle who tells the truth. Jest you take the girl there an' that'll settle it."

"Ther's horse-sense in that."

"But I am in a hurry," protested the kidnapper, "and this delay will ruin my plans."

"Hum! What are your plans?"

"I want to get to Whately and take a train."

"Where did you come from?"

"Honson."

"Makin' the journey on foot with these children?"

"No, we had a team, but it was run into and destroyed here. You can see the wreck of the carriage by getting out."

"Which train do you want—the 10:20, or 11:40?"

"The 10:20. The other will be too late. I had planned to go on the 10:20, and—"

"Stranger, you're a humbug. There ain't any 10:20, nor any train till the 12:10. I laid a trap for you, and you run into it. I know now who the liar is in this crowd, and he could wear your boots. Old man, you may as well haul off; these children go to Black Bluffs with me, and if you interfere, I'll mark a checker-board on your back with my whip!"

The kidnapper uttered an oath.

"Don't you interfere, you country boor, or I'll drop on you like a panther!"

"It'll be your last drop, save one, and that will be into the river. If you want a fight, come on! You hear me?"

The speaker rose up and showed a figure almost gigantic, and the kidnapper uttered another oath and shrunk back. By this time Sim had taken the liberty of entering the wagon, and the big man gave his whip a crack.

"Strangers, we're ready to go, unless you accommodate me with a fight. What say—shall we hammer each other fifty or sixty rounds?"

"I'll have the law of you!" roared the baffled villain.

"Sail right in!"

But the men did not "sail in," nor did they have any more to say. They knew they had a good chance to win the game by using their revolvers, but they were not quite desperate enough to do murder when four witnesses were liable to appear against them. Nothing more was heard from them, and the big man hazarded the surmise that they were in retreat.

"Such being the case, we'll go on," he added; and then he touched his horse and they started.

"We hadn't orter let 'em git away," said Sim.

"I suppose you're right, but I can't stop to bother with them. We'll tell Gray when we get to the Bluffs, and let him settle their hash for them."

Sim felt that he could not very well object further, and, besides, the boy with a bad name was not accustomed to override the opinions of men. He now felt very grateful to the big man for helping them, and both he and Irma said as much.

The latter then told her story. After she retired for the night she had been unable to sleep because of painful thoughts concerning her father, so she went out as Sim had seen her do on a previous night.

On this occasion, however, she had been seized by the two men, who had been lingering near, and carried away. Who they were she could not tell; they seemed to be entire strangers, and she could advance no reason why they should kidnap her.

The big man and his friend commented freely, wondering to find her Erwin Redmond's daughter—both had known her mother, years before—but they offered no explanation of the motive of the abduction which seemed plausible.

Sim said but little, but an idea was working in his mind. He recalled the talk of the village people, and, remembering that he had heard it said that Irma was heir to all Barnard's wealth, and that the Abbotts came next, he nodded frequently as he thought.

He had none too good opinion of the Abbotts to believe that they might have been at the bottom of this outrage. If such was the fact it was unfortunate that they had been allowed to escape; a confession wrung from them would have silenced the Abbotts effectually. It was too late to think of this, however.

As they moved toward the village they passed Tornado, the old race-horse, who was peacefully plodding his way home. He walked with a limp, but probably consoled himself with the fact that he had won a gallant race. And so he had; only for him Irma would then have been in the hands of the abductors.

When Black Bluffs was reached, Irma was restored to her protectors, much to their surprise, for she had not been missed, and they promised to take precautions to protect her in future.

Sim went to his little room in a contented frame of mind. He had done the girl a decided favor, and partially made amends for getting Redmond into trouble—at least, so he looked at it.

The following day Redmond had his preliminary examination, and Sim was forced to go upon the stand and tell his story. He did not add to his reputation there, for he did not prove to be a good witness. All he told was drawn

from him with difficulty, and when it came to identifying the prisoner as his passenger over the river, he nearly failed the prosecution entirely.

He declined to say that Redmond and his passenger were one, and Gray, remembering his positive identification on a previous occasion, became very angry.

There were signs of trouble on this point, but Redmond averted it by calmly saying:

"You need not discuss this matter. I admit that I was the passenger named."

There was a momentary hush in the room, for all regarded it as a fatal admission, and one of the spectators muttered:

"See what comes of a man not having a lawyer to tell him better!"

"You acknowledge the fact, eh?" said the justice.

"Yes."

"Also, that you lost this letter?"

"No. I never saw or heard of the letter."

The justice looked surprised, and then continued:

"Why were you in Black Bluffs?"

"To see Squire Barnard," answered Redmond firmly.

"Indeed! Well, did you see him?"

"Yes. I went to his house and saw him."

Surprise increased in the room, and if the prisoner's bearing had not been so firm, it would have been the opinion of all that he was about to confess the murder. If he was not, he was making admissions which would entangle him in a web from which he would find it hard to extricate himself.

"Why did you go?" the justice resumed.

"He wrote that he had a proposition to make to me, and I went at his request."

Nobody believed this. They remembered the old squire's bitter hatred of Redmond, and felt sure that he was telling a falsehood, and it seemed a very silly one, past the credence of all who heard.

"What was this proposition?"

"If I had known what it was," said the prisoner, in a voice far from steady, "I would not have gone a step; but, not knowing, I was influenced by my wife's last request. She said that the day would come when her father would relent, and she made me promise to answer any summons. I answered this, and learned what Squire Barnard wanted."

"And what was that?"

"He said if I would forever part with my child," and here the speaker glanced at Irma, "and let him place her beyond my knowledge, he would provide for her."

"Did you decline?"

"Decline! Most certainly I did. What! would you have a father become party to a scheme which would orphan a girl of her tender years?"

Redmond spoke vehemently, and stretched out one hand dramatically toward Irma. If they had known that he was innocent, and was speaking the truth, the words would have met with applause; but he had few friends there, and those who heard only received his question as the cunning art of a world-wise man.

Irma, however, burst into tears, and Sim moved uneasily in his seat and longed to do more to help the pale gentleman.

"You regarded the proposal as an insult?" asked the justice.

"I regarded it as heartless, sir."

"Next," said the justice, with cold deliberation, "being angry, how did you revenge the insult?"

CHAPTER XIV.

HELD FOR TRIAL.

REDMOND calmly replied:

"I understand your insinuation, sir, but it is uncalled for. I did not lay a hand on Squire Barnard, as you would have people suppose. I simply rejected his unjust proposition, and left the house."

"Leaving Barnard safe and well behind you?"

"Yes, sir; perfectly safe and well."

"Did the servants know of this visit?"

"I have no means of knowing that, but I have told this story to state that some one listened to our conversation."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this: When I left Mr. Barnard's room I did so abruptly, and as I opened the door I saw some one flit out of the hall toward the stairs, as though he had been listening at the door."

"Is this an attack on the servants?" asked the justice.

"I do not think it was Nason, and it certainly

as not his wife. I think it was a younger man than Nason."

Nobody saw anything significant about this but Sim. He looked over at Algernon Abbott. That person was moving uneasily in his chair. Sim believed that he knew who the listener had been.

"Did Squire Barnard see the eavesdropper?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Didn't you mention it?"

"I did not."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I was in no mood for speaking of what then seemed trivial. I now leave you to say whether it was so, or not. I am aware that I may not be believed, but I have decided to tell all, even at the risk of involving myself by the confession that I was at the house, hoping thereby to further the ends of justice."

Half the people in the room smiled broadly. They did not believe his story of the unknown listener, and, already regarded him as guilty.

"Did Barnard accompany you to the outer door?"

"Yes."

"Did you part as friends?"

"Hardly. He had made an unjust proposal to me, and I rejected it. There was no actual quarrel between us, but it would be stretching a point to say that our parting was friendly."

"I believe that!" said Detective Wickes, audibly.

Wickes was angry. He was not shining in this case as he aspired to shine, and he longed for an opportunity to put himself forward as a great man.

The justice overlooked the interruption, as it accorded with his own opinion, and proceeded to question Redmond further. When he settled down to work he had a degree of craft, and though he was unable to environ the prisoner by his replies, he did so frame his own questions that he made the case look very dark, and the unknown listener was lost sight of almost entirely. The justice need not have troubled himself to add to matters, however; with affairs as they were it was plainly his duty to hold Redmond for trial, and this he did with due ceremony.

The prisoner accepted the inevitable with composure, and nearly every one was satisfied with the result.

Sim was an exception. His interest in the pale gentleman never wavered, and he believed an outrage was being done. Still, he said nothing concerning what he had learned about Algernon. If he told of it he felt sure that he would be disbelieved, and as he had been forced to fight all his battles alone, so he now proposed to go on and try to get direct evidence against young Abbott.

The prisoner had thanked him warmly for saving Irma, and this completed the boy's attachment to him.

He would have gone through fire to save the pale gentleman.

He was a good deal worried by the case of the kidnappers. Constable Gray had declared that he could spend no time on them then, and had turned the case over to a deputy-sheriff who chanced to be at hand. This man had gone after them with more zeal than Gray would have shown, but Sim was afraid they would escape. If, however, they were taken and could be made to confess, and this confession implicated the Abbotts, as Sim hoped, he would then be able to make a charge against Algernon with more hope.

Redmond had one sympathizer at the examination more than he counted on. This was Mr. Bigelow. That gentleman's reason for sympathizing with him was not exactly benevolent. When they started for the court-room Mr. Woods had presumed upon his experience as a lawyer, and observed that Redmond was probably guilty.

From that moment Bigelow believed that Redmond was *not* guilty. He opposed Woods on general principles, and after the invariable argument which followed, was one of the upholders of the prisoner's cause.

He went back to Abbott's house in a very irascible frame of mind.

"It's an outrage, sir!" he declared, at the table, as he flourished his fork to the great danger of his neighbors. "It is a diabolical wrong, by George, to hold that man."

"There was ample ground," persisted Woods.

"Who says so?"

"I do. I say that Redmond carries the brand of Cain on his face."

"Pshaw! you're losing your eyesight. You're getting old and in your dotage, Woods. A more frank, honest-looking man than Redmond I

never saw. What! he guilty? Never, sir, never! I would as soon suspect that boy of killing Barnard."

He pointed his fork directly at Algernon. That boy must have been upset by such direct attention. He gave a start, dropped the spoon he was handling, and then sat turning white and red by turns.

"Come," pursued Bigelow, ironically, "confess that *you* killed Barnard—*you*, Algerine, or whatever your high-fangled name is!"

Algernon rushed a glass in front of his face to hide his confusion, but in his trepidation nearly strangled himself with water. He went off into a paroxysm of coughing, and then suddenly sprung up and fled from the room.

"Bless my soul!" uttered Bigelow, "what cyclone hit *him*, I'd like to know?"

"You scared the poor child," said Woods, sternly.

"Nonsense! How can a boy without human feeling be scared?"

"I hold that it is a duty to our host to respect his son," Woods warmly declared.

"Then let him make his son worthy of respect. That boy needs to be—"

"Whipped?"

"Made over! But we wander from our subject."

They did not wander from it again, and the two old gentlemen fiercely debated the question of Redmond's guilt to the exclusion of all other subjects and all other persons.

After supper Woods went out to smoke a cigar alone, being very angry at his employer, and he was approached cautiously by Algernon. He cordially disliked the boy, but, as long as Bigelow did the same, he forced himself to be kind.

"Come here, my poor youth. There is one who grieves that you should be subjected to such usage. Bigelow is a barbarian."

"He means well," said Algernon, mindful of the fact that Bigelow was a rich relative.

"Then he takes a mighty poor way of showing it. A youth of your tender years should not be frightened."

"Thank you, sir; I try to be good."

"I'm sure you always are," replied Woods, soothingly, but mentally adding: "Lord forgive me for such a lie!"

"Do you really think Redmond guilty?"

Algernon asked the question after a pause, but he did not look at the lawyer. His attention was on the ground, and he dug his heel nervously into the earth.

"No doubt of it."

"Will they—a—punish him?"

"They will hang him."

Algernon shivered.

"There are different degrees of such a thing, ain't there, sir?—murder in the first and second degree?"

"Oh! yes."

"Suppose he killed Barnard when he was mad—when his mind was not right, would it be right to hang him?"

"They'd hang him just the same," Woods replied, with more of obstinacy than regard for veracity.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Algernon wheeled, muttered something about work to do, and hastened away. Woods looked after him wonderingly.

"Hallo! what's hit him? Mighty queer boy, he is. Why has he come asking all these questions? He must be interested in Redmond, like that foggy, Bigelow. Algernon is a queer boy!"

CHAPTER XV.

ROUGH PASSENGERS OVER THE FERRY.

WHEN Sim left the court-room he first ate a hasty supper, and then went to the river to attend to harness. He was rather neglecting the ferry of late, and it was possible that lack of accommodation might lead to a rival line, as there were other boys who owned boats.

When he reached his boat he sat down on one of the seats and began to reflect on the examination. The pale gentleman was held for trial, and unless he, Sim, could help him in some way, the case might go hard with him.

And how was it to be done?

How was he to prove what he suspected concerning Algernon Abbott?

While he was thus thinking voices sounded on the bank above him.

"There surely must be boats along here, and we must have one, whether or no. Hang it! we ought to have learned to swim when we were boys!"

"I've often cursed myself for a fool that I didn't."

"Well, it's too late now. Let us look for a boat."

They started away, but Sim did not intend to let them go. Here were men who plainly knew nothing about his ferry line, but their money was just as good as that of any other person. He gave his boat a push and sent it into view.

"Hallo, there," he said. "Anybody ter cross?"

"What's that?" cried one of the strangers, and his voice sounded startled.

"It's only me, and I'm the propri'tor o' this hyar ferry. I take folkses across fer the small sum o' three cents a head. Goin' over?"

"It is only a boy," and the speaker seemed relieved. "Yes, sonny, we want to go over, and we'll give you a quarter to do the job spry. Swing nearer the bank—we can't swim, and the water seems deep here."

"No need o' yer gettin' inter it. Thar ye come, safe ez a hoss-fly."

They were in the boat by this time, and one of them continued, with a mixture of impatience and relief:

"Bend your back, bub, and spin us over. We are in a hurry. Here's your quarter."

Sim pocketed the coin, and then plunged his oars into the water briskly.

"This is better than I dared hope," said one, to his companion.

"Yes; we were right in luck."

"If we hit it all right on the other side, we shall soon be safe from them all."

"Sh!" cautioned the second man.

The warning was timely, but the damage was already done. With them once beside him, where he could see them and plainly hear their voices, Sim had made a discovery. These men were no strangers to him.

They were the same two who had kidnapped Irma!

This was a startling discovery. Here were the very parties Sim so desired to have captured, though why they had ventured near Black Bluffs was not clear. Perhaps, hard pressed by the deputy-sheriff, they had adopted the bold resource of going just where they would not be expected.

For a few moments a sense of his own weakness rather dazed the lad, but, all his courage arose and he vowed that he would not let these men go without an effort to bring them to justice. How he was to do it he did not know, but he had not forgotten that they could not swim.

He had let up on his rowing as soon as he made the discovery, and, while seeming to use the oars as briskly as ever, was doing no more than to keep the boat from drifting down the stream.

"See here, you young hound!" suddenly cried the spokesman in the boat, "what do you mean, anyway? Why don't you row?"

"I be rowin', but the current is mighty strong here."

"Gammon! I know better than that, and you are going to *do* better. Will you pull in earnest?"

"Ain't I pullin'?"

The second man uttered an oath.

"No use to fool with him. He needs a lesson!" he added.

So saying, he jerked a revolver from his pocket, and thrust it almost under Sim's nose.

"Now will you pull?" he demanded.

Sim *did* pull, but not in the way the man meant. It was a chance not to be expected, and he quickly swung one oar into the boat and made a clutch for the revolver. If it came to a struggle his strength would avail nothing against that of the man; he trusted all to luck, and went in to win or lose boldly.

Luck did not fail him; although he had to work in the dark, he gained just the hold he wished, and before the surprised passenger could tighten his own hold, the coveted weapon was wrested away.

Another moment and Sim drew in the other oar, and turned the revolver on the men.

"Now then, who holds the trumps?" the boy coolly asked.

"You young scoundrel, put down that weapon!"

"Thank you, I guess *not*!"

"We'll throw you out of the boat if you don't."

"No, you won't."

"I swear that we will."

"No, you won't. 'Cause why, I've got the grip. Ef you go fur ter touch me I'll use this shooter on ye. You turned it on me first, an' I ain't goin' ter be squeamish about holdin' my end up. You may ez wal set still, fur I've not only got this revolver, but you can't swim, an' ef ye cut up rusty, I'll jest tip the boat over an' let ye drowned."

He who had lost the revolver growled out a fierce exclamation, but his comrade was *more* crafty. He affected to laugh, and said:

"Ha! ha! a very good joke all around. My boy, I admire your pluck, but you see we are in a hurry. Make haste and take us to the other bank, and I'll give you a dollar."

"I ain't makin' haste ter-night, but we're goin' ter stay right hyar. Thar will be a fine chance ter see the sun rise in the mornin'."

"Surely, you are not in earnest?"

"Yes, I be."

"Don't you intend to take us across?"

"Not a take."

"And you propose to keep us here in the middle of the river all night?"

"Jes' so, mister."

"Why, you villainous little wretch, what possesses you, anyhow? Don't you feel properly paid—"

"Don't keer a cent fur that; you kin have yer money back ef ye say so, but hyar we stay. I ain't goin' ter row ye over."

"Take up those oars and row, or I'll fire you out of the boat!" thundered the man.

"No, you won't. 'Cause why? I've got this revolver, an' ef you lay a hand on me I'm goin' ter blaze away. I mean business, so thar ain't any use o' arguin' the case. I hope you'll give 'tention, an' be reconciled ter stayin' here."

The passengers were in a fury. As Sim had suspected, they were hard pressed by the deputy-sheriff, and it was a matter of great importance that every moment should be utilized in flight.

They raved, threatened, argued, and used every other means they could think of to move the ferry-boy, but there he sat as cool as ever, facing them grimly and keeping the revolver ready for use.

Sim "held the fort" in earnest.

While the men were considering how they could outwit, or overpower him, he was still watching the signal-lights. He had kept the boat nearly stationary by means of one oar, and what he most desired was to see the west light swing. That would probably mean the return of the constable.

Much sooner than he dared expect this hope was realized, so far as the light went. It was swung in the orthodox style, and he believed that Gray was there.

Now came the most delicate task of all—to deliver the kidnappers over to the official.

CHAPTER XVI.

SIM KEEPS AT WORK.

Sim looked critically at the light and decided that it was waved in a way much like Gray's, and he looked about for a plausible way to do the rest of the work. He believed he had it after a little meditation.

"Now ye hev quieted down I don't mind ef I take ye over," he said. "I was only hevin' a little fun with ye, an' now ef ye don't git too fast, an' cut up rough, I'll see ye safe over. But don't kick up ag'in' my way, fur it won't do any good. Ye see the shootin'-iron still laughin' at ye."

The boy with the one oar was deftly paddling along, but he still kept the revolver ready for use. Long experience in his boat made this easy.

The men seemed unsuspicious. Either they had not noticed the swinging light or they did not comprehend what it meant, and they seemed relieved at the prospect of thus getting out of their fix. Sim noticed that they did not ask for the revolver, and he suspected that they intended to give him a whipping, if not worse, when once across.

Surely, such men would be greedy for revenge.

Once more the boy had to do some planning, and when near the bank he eased up and let the boat stop, which it did, fifty feet from the bank. The crisis was at hand.

"Hallo!" he cried. "Be you thar, Gray?"

"Yes, certainly; hurry up!" the constable's voice answered from the bank.

The kidnappers gave a startled jump and looked around in evident alarm.

"Stiddy, thar!" cautioned Sim. "B'ar in mind that this 'ere revolver is a-lookin' at ye. Don't ye try any funny games, or I'll shoot. Say, Mr. Constable, I've got two pris'ners hyar fur ye, and I dassent land. Wade out, an' you'll get well paid fur it."

"A trap!" hissed one of the kidnappers, with an oath. "Boy, row us back, or you're a dead goose!"

"Never!" retorted Sim. "Look out for the revolver; I'm a-lookin' at ye. Help, Gray! Come on, ter onc't!"

There was some trepidation in the last words, for the men both arose, and the ferry-boy saw that they were not going to yield tamely. Indeed, there was evidence that an attack was coming, and he repeated his call.

It had barely been made when one of the kidnappers sprung forward, a furious threat on his lips, and his hands outstretched to grasp Sim.

The latter thought there was but one way for him. If the men got the best of it they might kill him at once. So he pulled the trigger with the muzzle bearing full upon the man. A flash, a report and a bitter cry followed, and down went the kidnapper to the bottom of the boat.

As he fired, Sim sprang to one side to avoid the rush, but a new danger now menaced him. The second man had swung an oar aloft, and plainly intended to beat down the brave lad. Two ideas occurred to him—the first, to leap into the river; the second, to stick to his boat, whether or no. He decided to do the last, come what might.

"Quick, Gray! Help!"

Once more he cried to the constable.

A moment later down came the oar furiously. It did not hit him.

With an agile leap he sprang toward the assailant, thus getting inside the attack, as it were, and the oar hit only the seat of the boat.

Then Sim grappled eagerly with his enemy.

The latter growled out a curse, grasped the boy, swung him from his feet, and essayed to fling him into the river. All went well but the last part. Sim was not to be flung—he clung like a burr.

But his assailant forced him back in the boat and raised his fist for a stunning blow. Sim saw the danger and squirmed like an eel, but all in vain; he was held tightly, and in a moment more the blow would come.

Just then the boat rocked violently, and a bright light was flashed on the scene.

"What the fiends is the racket?" cried a voice.

It was Gray's voice. He came at Sim's call, but he would not be in time to interfere. The boy must depend on himself, and he did so, nobly. Swinging his foot around he deftly tripped the kidnapper, and both went over together, Sim on top.

Before he could rise Gray's hand was on his arm.

"What is the rumpus?" demanded the constable.

"This man! holt ont'er him!" gasped the boy. Almost instantly Gray flourished a brace of revolvers.

"Now, hold right on, the whole of you!" he ordered. "I will blow the first man who stirs 'way to glory, Sim."

"These are them men who stole Irma Redmond!"

"Ha! is that so? Good boy! By George, I'm with you in the game. You keep where you are, both of you; I hold two revolvers, you'll observe. Sim, look the gang over and see what you have. One seems to be hurt."

One was hurt. The victim of Sim's shot lay groaning in the bottom of the boat, and he now cried out that his leg was broken. His companion, struck with sudden and complete terror, crouched in the stern of the craft and said nothing, but Gray soon settled his case by applying handcuffs.

He then turned to the other man, and directed Sim to row for the east side of the river.

Sim quickly rowed across, briefly telling his story as they went, and when the bank was reached, the lantern was used to examine the prisoners.

He who was wounded, though helpless, remained plucky enough, but the other was as meek as a lamb. All the fight was gone out of him. As his friend had a broken leg, it became clear that he must be carried to some house, and Gray sent Sim for aid while he watched the prisoners.

At the end of half an hour the work was all done, and both in jail. The wounded man had a doctor, and his leg was properly attended to, but neither he nor his ally would confess a word.

Sim, however, positively identified them as the kidnappers.

"Well, we'll let the matter rest until morning, and then have Redmond's girl over to see them," said Gray. "Sim, my boy, you are a brick. I don't see where you stow away so much grit in your small body."

"Reckon it's in my head," answered Sim, honestly.

As he was not needed further, he then left the jail, and started homeward. He had wound up his river work that evening in such a stirring fashion that he felt as though he had earned his rest. Yet, he did not go home. As he was walking along, a new thought came to him and he suddenly paused.

"Wonder what Algernon is doin'? But I guess I won't worry 'bout him ter-night— Yes,

I will; I'm goin' over ter see ef thar's any sig' o' him."

So he started for Abbott's, walking briskly, and thinking about his latest adventure. What would come of it? Would the men confess? If so, would it prove that the Abbotts had been concerned in Irma's capture?

Suddenly his mind flashed to the present. Who was that skulking along like a wolf?

"Algernon, by hokey!"

Sim sprang to cover, and young Abbott passed without any suspicions that he was observed. It was worse than that; he had no sooner passed than Sim fell in behind him, cautious and patient as an Indian.

Algernon showed the same furtive manner that had marked his movements on a former occasion, but Sim was equal to the emergency and took good care not to be seen. The pursuit went on until the center of the village was passed, and Sim saw with some excitement that Algernon still headed for the Old Stone House.

His caution, too, increased, and the pursuer had considerable trouble to avoid discovery.

All doubts vanished when Barnard's was reached. There Algernon paused and began to look the premises over very narrowly. All was quiet, however; no light was burning, and the Nasons seemed to have retired.

When satisfied of this, Algernon climbed over the fence and cautiously approached the rear door. There he stopped to listen, and then produced his key, turned the bolt and entered.

Sim was close behind, and he listened eagerly to hear if there was any click to tell that the door was locked again, but none came.

Cautiously the young detective opened the door, but all was in his favor. As he looked a light shone on the upper floor, and he distinctly saw young Abbott lighting a lamp. When it was done he moved toward the late squire's room.

Sim crept up the stairs, and then found that the door had been closed behind Algernon. This was a disappointment, and he dared not open it, but when he applied his eye to the key-hole he found that he could see the other boy as he then stood.

He had gone to the old bureau which he examined on his first visit, and was already looking over the contents of the upper drawer. This was filled with small articles, like handkerchiefs and collars, yet he was subjecting all to examination, shaking out the former as though he expected to find something concealed in them.

Sim remembered that on the previous visit he had searched the papers in a lower drawer, and drew an inference from this.

There was a certain paper in existence, or believed by Algernon to be in existence, which he wished to find.

Sim now did some quick thinking, and came to the conclusion that he ought to summon Mr. Gray at once. Another chance as good as this might not occur, and he had won the constable's good will by capturing the kidnappers.

Yes, he would summon Gray at once.

He turned away, crept down-stairs and opened the door, but had hardly put his head out when he was seized by a strong hand.

"Aha! you young heathen!" cried a rough voice, "I've got you, have I? Now I'd like to know what you're up to the burglary business for— Why, it isn't Algernon!"

The last words were spoken in surprise, and as he ceased shaking his small prisoner the latter managed to look up at his face.

The man was Mr. Bigelow.

What was he doing there?

CHAPTER XVII.

A HERO AT LAST.

It took Sim only a short time to recover his wits, and then he eagerly asked the question which was in his mind.

"What're ye doin' hyar?"

"That's straight forward, if not polite," Mr. Bigelow observed, "and I don't mind saying that I am looking after that crazy-headed Algernon, whom I suspect of mischief. But why are you acting the Jack Sheppard, I'd like to know?"

"I'm watchin' Algernon, too," replied Sim, feeling sure that he could depend upon Bigelow; "and he's in thar a-tumblin' the old squire's things all over—"

"Say, are you working with him?"

"No. I'm playin' detective on him."

"Good, good! You're a lad with human feeling, sure enough. Now, see here—the constable ought to be set upon Mister Algernon."

"I know it, and won't you go fur him while I watch Algernon?" eagerly asked Sim.

"Go! Of course, I will; I'm a lively lad of sixty-one summers—just the boy to run errands,

"I'm off, and if I don't beat the best running record, I'm a perjurer. Good-by—watch Algerine, or whatever he's called—don't let him escape!"

Saying all this hurriedly the old gentleman ran across the lawn as lightly as a cow, and Sim, never once remembering that he would be a more proper messenger, considering his years, turned and re-entered the house.

Ascending the stairs he found the boy still turning over the contents of the bureau, and searching as diligently as ever for—what? Sim remembered the talk about a possible will, and wondered if it was this that interested Algerne.

Half an hour passed in this way, and then the whole bureau had been examined to the best of Algerne's ability—and all in vain. Sim heard a disappointed exclamation from him, and then he abruptly arose and passed from the line of Sim's observation.

The latter continued at the door, and for five minutes he heard young Abbott moving about. He judged that he was searching in other parts of the room, but could see nothing.

Suddenly the door opened—so suddenly that he had no time whatever to retreat—and he and Algerne stood face to face.

Young Abbott paused, and then stood staring as though he looked upon a ghost. He was utterly dumfounded, and his eyes seemed to grow several sizes larger, while his face lost color and the hand which held the lamp trembled.

Sim was chagrined at being discovered, but he had a disposition to make the best of it.

"Hello, Algerne!" he said, easily.

But Abbott stared as before and said nothing.

"Did ye find it?" Sim continued.

Algerne's lips moved, but his voice failed to respond.

"Looks sorter bad ter see ye here," Sim pursued, ready to take advantage of this panic.

"Some folks say it was *you* that killed the ole squire!"

Algerne found his voice at last. He gave a startled cry, dodged back into the room and tried to close the door, but Sim was too quick for him. He darted after, and held the door open.

"No, yer don't! Thar is officers comin' ter 'rest yer an' they want the way clear."

"To arrest me?" gasped Abbott.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Killin' the ole squire!" said Sim, at a venture.

Algerne uttered a gasping cry.

"Let me out! let me out!" he cried, and tried to pass, but Sim forced him back.

"Take it cool, Algerne. 'Tain't no use ter kick."

Algerne, however, was of another opinion. He was half-mad with fear, and he suddenly flew to the bed and snatched off one of the caps to the bed-post, which was kept in place by a pin running from the cap to the post, and should have been tight, but it was not, and Algerne seemed to have known it.

Armed with this he flew at Sim like a madman, and the latter saw that there was really danger. He dodged around the table and Algerne followed, trying to overtake and hit him.

Then ensued one of the liveliest races on record.

Both were young and nimble, and if no one molested them it might be a question of endurance. Sim had no weapon and he did not really care to oppose a madman, so he contented himself with running.

He was well aware, however, that the noise would soon arouse the Nasons, and he did not know what would be the result if they appeared on the scene before Bigelow and the constable.

Algerne, however, saw that he was not making any progress, and, suddenly, instead of running around the table, he sprang upon it and then made a dive for Sim. It was an unexpected move, and Sim saw at once that there was no escape; he must face his enemy.

He did so gallantly.

Springing forward he first dodged the furious blow aimed at him, and then grappled with Algerne. Here his superior strength came in good use. Giving his adversary no time to use the bed-cap again he ran him rapidly back until Abbott tripped and fell to the floor with a tremendous crash, Sim coming down on top of him.

Just then the door was flung open and Mr. Bigelow and Constable Gray dashed in.

The latter, accustomed to affrays, sprang forward at once, and when Algerne began to struggle he found stronger hands opposed to him. Gray clapped on handcuffs and sat him up in a chair.

Algerne was all in a perspiration, his eyes were wild and his pallor something startling.

He looked at Gray and quaked like a leaf, while the constable, who had evidently had a talk with Bigelow, impulsively grasped Sim's hand.

"My boy, you're a hero!" he cried.

"Certainly, he is!" echoed Bigelow, warmly.

"I always said he was a boy with human feeling, though that mule-headed Woods wouldn't— But never mind; he won't say any more about Sim now we've discovered— But never mind *that*, either. Gray, what sort of a chap is terrible Algerne?"

Sim moved forward quickly, and leveled one finger straight at young Abbott:

"He killed Squire Barnard!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't!" shrieked Algerne. "He died in a fit. I didn't hit him hard enough to kill him!"

"Then it was you who hit him?"

"Yes, but he was going to wrong me. He said he would give me all his money, and then he made another will."

Gray thought rapidly. He remembered Erwin Redmond's story at the examination, and saw the possibility that a mistake had been made. He realized, too, that then, if ever, was the time to get the truth from the frightened boy.

"You heard Barnard talk with Redmond, did you?"

"Yes, and when Redmond was gone the squire muttered about a will drawn up in favor of the girl. He didn't know that I was in the house, but I was, and I heard him, and then I saw he meant to wrong me; and then I crept in and took the cap off the bed-post and struck him before he knew I was there, and he fell down and had a fit and then died! But I didn't do it, and nobody can blame me, and they can't hang folks for having others die a natural death!"

Vehemently all this was said, and Algerne grew a trifle incoherent, but the truth was out at last.

Even Gray believed, but he knew that, in all probability, Algerne was deluding himself when he thought any cause but his own blow had operated to kill the old squire.

Bigelow and Sim stood back while some details of the tragedy were learned, and the story, strengthened by some reasoning on the part of the hearers, ran as follows:

Nathan Barnard, angry with almost everybody, and of very eccentric nature, actually selected Algerne as his heir because the latter was not strong-minded. For six months the boy was a visitor at the house, but only they two knew of the fact. The squire had ordered Algerne not to tell even Adelbert, and the boy's sly nature was equal to the demands made upon it.

The secret was well kept.

Algerne, however, proved too sly and vicious. One day he stole the door-key for an hour until the village locksmith could make an impression, and in a short time he had a key of his own, unknown to Barnard.

Thus he was enabled to visit the house without even the old squire knowing.

It is to be presumed that, in time, Barnard learned something about Algerne's viciousness—or it may be his heart softened. At any rate, he had a will drawn up by a lawyer just on the point of going to Europe, by the terms of which Irma Redmond was to have all his property when he died.

Why he afterward sent for Irma's father and asked him to give her up, is uncertain, though the fact was always looked upon as a freak on his part, in keeping with his usual eccentricities.

Algerne, having secretly stolen into the house by means of his false key, heard all the talk between Barnard and Redmond, which was exactly as the latter stated at his trial, and then, when he heard Barnard mutter about a will in Irma's favor, his dwarfed mind was full of fury and he did the deed which had shocked all Black Bluffs.

Bigelow, Gray and Sim were not the only hearers of his confessions; the servants, startled from their sleep, had appeared and heard the same; and the mystery of the Old Stone House was clear to plenty of witnesses at last.

The constable looked very grave, for he knew that Algerne was weak-minded in many respects, and he thought it would be a severe blow to his parents.

As they were about to leave the house Sim whispered to Gray, and then the latter hesitated, meditated and turned to the prisoner.

"Algerne, give us the truth about Woods's watch, will you?"

Young Abbott was too much demoralized to refuse.

"I found it in Woods's coat-pocket—I suppose he put it there absent-mindedly, and forgot it—

and I put it in Sim's room because Adelbert and I hated him."

"That's settled!" exclaimed Bigelow, rubbing his hands, "and if I don't take that old crank of a Woods down several notches I'm a perjurer. Hang the obstinate fellow! I always told him this boy had fellow feeling, and now I'll say more. Sim, boy, hold up your head, face the music and listen to the toot of the bugle! Talking about heirs, you may yet be mine. I need one, and I came to Black Bluffs on purpose to find the son of an old school-fellow, long lost sight of, and size him up. Sim, you gamey young rascal, why didn't you ever tell me your last name was Wallace? You're the boy I was looking after!"

"Mel!" echoed Sim, in blank wonder.

"Nobody else. Now, don't you go to counting your chicks before they are hatched, but if I continue to like you as well as I do now, you will be my heir. Bless my soul, I long to see you meet Woods! If ever you saw an old fogey ready to go down into his boots and ear dirt, it is that same Woods now he knows you are Arthur Wallace's boy. But don't you blame him. Woods will growl, and howl, and yowl, as long as he lives, but his heart is all right. Good fellow, only he's an obstinate old crank. Nobody could get along with him but me, but I am so good-natured that I never lose temper with him. See, my boy?"

And Mr. Bigelow beamed upon Sim as blandly as though the boy had not often heard his fierce wars of words with the worthy private solicitor.

Sim was the lion of Black Bluffs. By honesty, heroism and straightforward work he had thrown off the bad name attached to him, and nobody called him "Surly" Sim after that night. He was voted a hero, and when it was known that he was likely to be Mr. Bigelow's heir he had scores of servile friends.

But the Abbotts were in sorrow and disgrace, for not only was Algerne in jail for killing the squire, but the kidnappers had confessed, and it was known that Jason Abbott, had hired them to steal Irma.

It was a dark day for the family, and they could hope to heir neither Barnard's nor Bigelow's property.

They never did. Algerne, pronounced not of sound mind, was sent to an asylum where he will spend all his life, and when gentle Erwin Redmond, who was released from jail, refused to prosecute Jason, the rest of the family shrunk away, miserable, disgraced and hated by all their old friends.

When Squire Barnard's will was found, giving all his wealth to Irma, Redmond allowed her to take it, but only on condition that large sums be given in charity to the needy poor whom they could see in person. He was free from all blame in the murder case, and men came to believe there had never been grounds for Barnard's enmity to him.

Certainly, he was a fine man.

The kidnappers were duly tried and sentenced and then Mr. Bigelow sent Sim to school. This year the young man graduates from Harvard, and he will doubtless do so with honor. As Bigelow has formally made him his heir he need do no work, but Sim is as ambitious as ever.

He wants to get ahead.

Having lived down the bad name he once had, and won the respect of all, he intends to open as a lawyer. Miss Irma Redmond is interested in his plans, and it is said that in a short time she will become his wife.

Detective Wickes utterly collapsed when his fine theory went to pieces in the light of Algerne's confession, and he abruptly disappeared.

Mr. Woods never quite recovered from the shock of having accused Sim of being a thief, but when Bigelow, in their heated arguments—which still occur—accuses him of the mistake, the private solicitor declares that it was owing to the fact that he was deceived—"infamously deceived!"

Both he and Bigelow have Sim's kindest regard, for the young man knows they are true as steel, though peculiar, and it is said that, during a late visit, Woods asked the president of the college to candidly state if Sim was not the most brilliant student there.

Bigelow gave the official no chance to reply.

"Why, of course Sim is!" he exclaimed, "and, Mr. President, let me say one thing to you in confidence—if our boy fails to reach the Presidency of the United States, it will be because he was whipped too much when a boy!"

And for once Woods did not try to make an argument.

THE END.

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